'An image of the dead' : the modern role of elegy with special reference to John Berryman's Dream Songs.

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'An Image of the Dead': the Modern Role of Elegy with Special Reference to John Berryman's *Dream Songs*.

by

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ABSTRACT

This is a study of the changing nature of elegy, with reference to the poetry of John Berryman, notably his major work, *The Dream Songs*. Through comparative studies of some of the most significant elegies in English, including 'Lycidas', *Adonais*, 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd' and *In Memoriam*, I intend to show that Berryman has achieved a radical change in the construction of mourning poetry. In his use of complex patterns of personae, schizophrenic shifts of tone and voice, and the motif of the American minstrel, Berryman has provided a sense of mourning that goes beyond the occasional and places elegy at the heart of his poetics. I shall look at the elegiac elements in his early poetry and that of his closest contemporaries, Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, Theodore Roethke and Delmore Schwartz, the so-called Middle Generation. With reference to certain Freudian and post-Freudian ideas, I will discuss Berryman's obsessive empathy, his drive to elegize, and explore the connections between this and the crisis of identity that the Songs' use of persona evokes. I will look at the Songs as a whole, showing that elegy is not simply contextualized by them, but is fundamental, and that the protean protagonist, Henry, is driven by the 'irreversible loss' to which the poet refers in his prefatory note, and which is echoed and enlarged by the losses of friends, authors and admired mentors that ensued through the poem's composition.[1] In his manic presentation of self and his use of the minstrel voice, Berryman brings together notions of death and persona to reevaluate elegy at the most basic level. By questioning the integrity of poetic consciousness, he makes his elegies at once more intimate and more universal, making the notion of elegy for the self the crux of his poetics.

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[1] *The Dream Songs* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1969; London: Faber and Faber 1990), p. v.

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Contents

Introduction

The poetry of John Berryman, especially his major work, *The Dream Songs*, is complex and allusive; intriguing to some, needlessly recondite to others. My aim in this thesis is to defuse to some extent these extremes of opinion in favour of a more concrete assessment by isolating and examining closely a specific strand of this major work, the elegiac, rather than attempting to come to terms with his poetry through any kind of inclusiveness, which has in some critical studies led to a seemingly inevitable light treatment. *The Dream Songs* itself is so inclusive, in its references to people, places, events and works of literature, that any critical attempt to codify and limit its heterogeneity seems ill-advised and less worthwhile than looking from close range at just one part of Berryman's poetics and using this analysis to draw wider conclusions.

The aspect of Berryman's work I shall be writing about is his use of elegy. *The Dream Songs* contains a number of elegies to friends, contemporaries and figures of literature who died during the twelve-year period over which the poem was composed. Berryman, with these elegies, seems to be attempting to achieve a very different effect from those of the elegists with whom we might be familiar in the canon, though he still retains many of the conventions to which they adhered. It is the difference with which I shall be chiefly concerned. The broader parts of discussion within my study will be attendant upon this central issue. My intention is that by working closely on Berryman's elegies I can achieve an investigative emphasis which ultimately allows for a more educated comparative approach than by attempting to deal in generalities; that is to say, the conclusions drawn from Berryman's elegiac work can be applied to his other poetry and ultimately his poetic method, so that everything regarding Berryman outside *The Dream Songs* and outside of elegy becomes, rather than background material, a source of comparative analysis. It is in this same sense that I shall be introducing the work of other poets to my investigation; not just to compare elegies (although chiefly that) but to compare their approaches and their poetics with Berryman's; to trace the methodology of the elegist, and how

and whether this deviates from their apparent artistic aims as a whole.

A connected issue in this study of elegy is the notion of the self and the inherent paradox of a poem which is intended to praise another in death often betraying reflection upon a self in life. While this is of course not new to elegy (in fact it is fundamental), I would suggest that Berryman's emphasis on it, and the context of these elegies within a long poem which is, in a sense, all about persona, makes for a very different kind of mourning. I will be pursuing the theme of a reflected self with reference to Berryman's interest in Freudian analysis, exemplified by his exhaustive logging of his own dreams and his time spent in psychotherapy, as well as using the work of other psychoanalytic writers to demonstrate the centrality of this to the poet whose major work is after all called *The Dream Songs*.[2]

I intend to connect these elements to a further, vital aspect of *The Dream Songs* which informs the work as a whole and defines the uniqueness of its elegies — the use of the minstrel voice and the poem's connections with African and African-American culture. This motif draws together the themes of death and mourning, the uncertainty of the self, and the dream state as an ongoing metaphor for these other themes, into a distinctive, inimitable character with massive literary and cultural resonance. It allows for many associations but is unquestionably peculiar to Berryman's long poem.

The sheer volume of deaths in Berryman's circle is a crucial factor in the history and character of his generation of poets, known as the Middle Generation, which included Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, Theodore Roethke and Delmore Schwartz. Although one can trace certain similarities in their work, it is as friends and colleagues that they are put together as a group. It was in their lives as much as, if not more than, in their poetry that they resembled each other; dogged by trauma, mental distress and tragedy. Berryman might be seen as the self-appointed chronicler in verse of this period of American literature. It was in this mode that Berryman came to distinguish himself as an elegist, in a voice that I believe sets out a new agenda for

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[2]John Haffenden, *The Life of John Berryman* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 247-8 (hereafter *Life*).

Berryman, forcing him, ironically, to turn away from influences and develop a novel, distinctive manner. I want to show that this transformation with respect to Berryman's progression towards *The Dream Songs* had a particular impact on the nature of the elegiac poem. Within the context of the Songs, with their manic protagonist and their diversity of both subject and viewpoint, Berryman appears to have blurred the edges of an accepted definition of elegy. While clearly aware of the genre's traditions, he seeks to express more explicitly and individually the moods of doubt, anger and selfishness which have in elegiac poems been hitherto ameliorated by ultimate resolution or restrained by contemporary decorum. Berryman does not seek to achieve such resolution, but instead situates grief within the scene of a troubled mind, contextualizing mourning rather than formalizing it as an exceptional opportunity for rhetoric. Berryman does not use mourning poetry as a chance for reconciliation with a misunderstood God, but as the most intense instances of the poet's concern with imminent or ever-present death. While I want to warn against the over-use of biographical inference to explain a poet's work, it is clear that elements of his biography have contributed influentially to his methodology in the writing of *The Dream Songs*.

He was born in Oklahoma in 1914, the son of a banker, John Allyn Smith. In 1926 the family moved to Florida where they made the acquaintance of John Angus Berryman. In June of that year, John Allyn Smith apparently committed suicide outside his twelve-year-old son's bedroom window, following financial and marital difficulties. Within a few weeks of his father's death, his mother married John Angus Berryman, and her two sons took his surname. Letters and other evidence demonstrate the intense and often claustrophobic nature of the young Berryman's relationship with his domineering mother. In 1931 he first attempted suicide by throwing himself in the path of an oncoming train, only to be rescued by school colleagues. He studied at Columbia under the influence of Mark Van Doren, and won a scholarship to study at Clare, Cambridge, where he met Auden and Yeats, and attended a lecture by Eliot,

whom he then dismissed, perhaps partly jealous of his fame, as an 'anthologiser'.[3] In 1939 while teaching at Wayne State University he suffered a series of seizures, diagnosed as petit mal epilepsy. His first pamphlet of poetry, called simply *Poems*, was published in 1942. During the forties he taught at Harvard and Princeton and published a Freudian biography of Stephen Crane, as well as *The Dispossessed*, his first major poetry collection. He also began psychiatric treatment in 1947, while his alcoholism and extra-marital affairs gathered momentum. He became a notable figure on the American poetry scene after the publication in 1956 of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, his first long poem. In 1964 he published the Pullitzer Prize-winning *77 Dream Songs*. The conclusion of *The Dream Songs*, entitled *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*, won the National Book Award in 1969. He was treated for alcoholism and addiction to medicinal drugs for the rest of his life until his suicide in 1972 when he jumped from a bridge in Minneapolis.

Although I intend to concentrate on the elegiac poetry of *The Dream Songs* it is important to realize the context within which these elegies came to be written, the relevance they have to the rest of the work, and vice versa. As with other subjects, elegies are episodes in the life, or existence of Henry ('the personality of Henry as he moves on in the world').[4] This is crucially distinct from being a verse autobiography of John Berryman. The relevance of Berryman's biography to his work is a contentious matter, and it has been the habit of some critics and biographers to take apparently biographical material from *The Dream Songs* as virtually verbatim accounts of the events to which they may allude. It was an assertion in his late work *Love & Fame* that 'I am not writing autobiography-in-verse, my friends'.[5] *The Dream Songs* is personal without being person-specific. In interviews Berryman would deflect suggestions of wholesale autobiography by making distinctions between his own life and the life of the protagonist of the Songs, Henry. In conversation with Richard Kostelanetz in 1969 he was asked about the extent of the resemblance

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[3]*Life* p. 83.
[4]John Plotz, 'An Interview with John Berryman,', *Harvard Advocate*, 103 (1969), p. 6.
[5]John Berryman, 'Message', *Love & Fame* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1970), p. 61.

between Henry and himself:

> 'Henry?' said Berryman; 'he is a very good friend of mine. I feel incredibly sympathetic to him. He doesn't enjoy my advantages of supervision, he just has vision. He's also simple-minded. He thinks if something happens to him, it's forever; but I know better.'[6]

Less cryptically, he reveals his addiction to writing Dream Songs and hints that Henry is not so much a distinct persona as a medium for transcribing his psyche: '"Well" said Berryman, "mostly I'm through with Henry, but the minute I say that pains course through me. I can't bear to be rid of that admirable outlet, that marvelous way of making your mind known to other people."'[7] Berryman is clearly exploiting the problem, probably an insoluble one, of how to separate the author from the voice of his work. Like all literary creations, Henry is part of his creator, but this confusion over persona is central to the nature of *The Dream Songs*. The tension of the poem arises out of the conflict between subject and self. This tension is often emphasized by the frequent use of dialogue of one form or another. The relationship between Henry and his unnamed friend who refers to him as Mr. Bones is the most obvious demonstration of this tension. Berryman is clearly fond of dialogue, as supported by the fact that he started or planned numerous plays (none of which he completed). The Songs which do not contain the tragi-comic conversations between Henry and his friend do have some mixing of voices often involving a series of echoes of or references to the literary past, or of ancient and obscure cultures. This invocation of other modes of utterance is, however, radically different from the palimpsestic mingling of voices to be found in *Personae* or *The Waste Land*. Berryman's motives for this plurality of voice are very different from Pound's or Eliot's, and seem to derive not from modernist principles but from the established poetics of *The Dream Songs*. The ongoing atmosphere of crisis and the manic switches of tone from line to line are elements of a scheme in which Henry's voices also operate, arrestingly colloquial, often brash in their explicit American-ness, delineating a vision of

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[6]Richard Kostelanetz, 'Conversation with Berryman', *Massachusetts Review,* 11 (1970), 340-347 (p. 340).
[7]ibid., p. 341.

mortality to be simultaneously feared and desired, a sense of death as something that happens to Henry many times (this may partly explain the image of 'Henry Pussycat'[8]), an event that he endures vicariously in the deaths of others. Henry often talks to and about himself in the second and third persons, and the diction used in these instances is sometimes very similar to that used in the elegies. The schizophrenic uncertainty of self contained in the poem is partly a demonstration of the poet's sense that trauma which causes such shatterings is merely a symptom of daily life, so that mundanity or hysteria of tone is no longer controlled by events, since Henry's awareness of death becomes constant. The multiple forms of address, and the fact that he addresses so many people, dead or alive, constitute a corollary of Henry's plight, his belief that the suicide of his father has cast his fate irreversibly to an existence based upon loss. This is proven to him throughout the poem by the successive deaths of so many friends and cherished literary figures. Such a presentation of mental crisis has been criticized as self-pity or disguised self-aggrandizement, but this stance fails to take account of the possibility of distance or irony in Berryman's presentation of character. Henry at times is certainly self-pitying, petulant, complaining, but these unattractive traits are once again, through over-zealous biographical inference, being connected to the poet himself. It should be remembered that Berryman considered *The Dream Songs* to be his attempt to write the *Song of Myself* of his age (according to an interview with the *Paris Review*); so in that sense the plurality of Henry makes his self-pity an inclusive rather than an insular trait.[9] The self of the poem is scattered, fragmentary, difficult to pin down, and yet larger than life. Berryman simply puts the problem of persona rightly at the centre of his work. John Haffenden, Berryman's biographer, remarks on the difficulties presented not only by obscure characterization but obscure language, which he regards as an unavoidable product of the Songs' intent:

> The obscurity of the poems was not deliberate [...] but comparable to St Jerome's task in biblical commentary: obscurity was due to the enormity of

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[8]E. g. 'I am Henry Pussy-cat! My whiskers fly.' (22, l. 18)
[9]Peter Stitt, 'John Berryman 1914-72', *Paris Review*, no. 53, (1972), 176-207 (p. 191).

> the task, the teacher's lack of skill, and the indifference of his listeners [...] it should be noted, however, that some of the difficulties and obscurities of *77 Dream Songs* are more apparent than real, and may depend only on the identification of specific names and references for the pattern and meaning to emerge.[10]

The first part of Haffenden's comment seems acceptable, the second part less so. The specific names and references are not necessarily conducive to understanding, that is, understanding of more than the superficialities of situation. The desire to identify names and references comes perhaps out of the Songs' lack of scene. Almost nowhere in the poem is there a fleshed-out depiction of place or much awareness of time; the poem exists in a kind of nervous limbo. It is this absence of situation that may accelerate the need to anchor the poem to a substantive set of concrete particulars. Yet this search for a central explanatory key to the poem can prove fruitless — reference does not equal understanding in the case of *The Dream Songs*. If the reader accepts the poem's lack of scene then the actual sense becomes easier to deal with. For example, Song 113 is entitled 'or Amy Vladeck or Riva Freifeld', and the text of the poem mentions 'Valerie Trueblood and Miss Kaplan'. The discovery that these people were students of Berryman's while teaching at Brown University in 1962 does not greatly advance one's understanding, since we do not really know any more about them for this piece of information. The important characters in the Song are Henry and God. The mention of these students seems more to be as human factors in Henry's struggle with God than for their specificity as friends, as the final stanza suggests:

> God declared war on Valerie Trueblood,
> against Miss Kaplan he had much to say
> O much to say too.
> My memory of his kindness comes like a flood
> for which I flush with gratitude; yet away
> he shouldna have put down Miss Trueblood.

The treatment of God here, with a 'memory of his kindness', suggests an intimacy

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[10]John Haffenden, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* (London: Macmillan, 1980), pp. 35 & 38 (hereafter *Commentary*)

more human than metaphysical; and this may be a key to what Henry is essentially about, and to Berryman's sources for the creation of a persona and its elegiac stance. In his *Paris Review* interview he accepts as 'very likely' the centrality of Freud's later work to his inspiration, remarking that 'I lectured on the book [*Civilisation and Its Discontents*] every year here at Minnesota, so I am very, very familiar with it'.[11] I believe that Berryman's deep interest in Freud and his experience of psychoanalysis lay the ground for a fundamental pattern of meaning to the Songs which, by its nature, may be unconscious. Nevertheless Berryman's sensitivity to his own predicament suggests that he was well capable of reasoning out the personal and the universal as one, and that behind all other emotional considerations expressed in the poem lies Henry's progressive urge to expiate irrational guilt. It is this guilt, and the mania that derives from it, that makes Berryman's elegies what they are, and sets them apart from those elegiac works he admires and recognizes: elegy for him is not occasional, nor merely contextualized, but is the heart of what he does.

The writing of elegies for someone to whom the author may not have been very close is nothing new, and in this view Berryman may not have so many claims made for him. The difference lies, however, in the influence upon and approach to such elegies, rather than the actual matter of them. The end result, to Berryman's advantage, is an ostensible continuity with the great elegies of English poetry; although along with the continuity comes dissociation, a refusal to accept traditional values that mourning arouses, and more importantly an entirely different starting point. While obviously Berryman's elegies are occasioned by deaths, his capacity to write mourning poetry is more of a given than something taken on with modesty and misgiving. Elegy is Berryman's *raison d'être*. Milton only vaguely knew Edward King at Cambridge, but talks, in 'Lycidas', of things they did 'together' with much passion.[12] Similarly, Berryman writes poems to Hemingway and Wallace Stevens, neither of whom he knew personally (except that Stevens sent Berryman a note

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[11]Stitt, p. 191.

[12]'Lycidas', l. 25, in *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. by John Carey & Alastair Fowler, (London: Longmans, 1968).

acknowledging receipt of his volume *The Dispossessed*, saying 'I am a bit careful about reading other people's poetry because it is so easy to pick up things').[13] At the time of *The Dispossessed* Berryman was awash with influences, had picked up lots of things, but by the time of *The Dream Songs* had found a distinctive, idiosyncratic voice. His elegy to Stevens, Song 219, demonstrates this in its garbled references to his occupation in insurance:

> He lifted up, among the actuaries,
> a grandee crow. Ah ha and he crowed good.
> That funny money-man.
> Mutter we all must as well we can.
> He mutter spiffy.

The Song is notable for the light-heartedness of its language, describing Stevens' poetry as a 'mutter'; yet the tone is vastly different to that of Song 235 to Hemingway, which begins: 'Tears Henry shed for poor old Hemingway | Hemingway in despair, Hemingway at the end', and goes on to associate Hemingway's suicide with the original suicide which drives the Songs, the death of the father:

> Save us from shotguns & father's suicides.
> It all depends on who you're the father of
> if you want to kill yourself —
> a bad example

The tone here is by contrast with the Song for Stevens raw and unsophisticated, and it is in these moments of the most personal intensity that Berryman confronts the motivating factors of his poetic. This can be seen whenever Henry refuses to be reconciled and presents the most pessimistic vision. In Song 153 he puts his discontent in an equally blunt fashion: 'I'm cross with god who has wrecked this generation.' Throughout the Songs he engages in angry confrontation with religion and expresses his confusion over the wreckage he describes, the death of so many American poets of the fifties and sixties. Yet beneath the bluntness of such declamations as the above is an undertone of ambivalence and chronic indecision, and

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[13] *Life*, p. 200.

also a preoccupation with the survival of the self, which is perhaps implicit in any discussion of the deaths of friends, especially poets whose gift seems to have led inexorably to their untimely destruction. Like Milton, Berryman is concerned with the progress of his fame, but perhaps to a more obsessive degree, and in more explicit expression. This centres around the double-sided use of the notion of immortality, its metaphorical and metaphysical senses. Henry frequently feels haunted by his dead friends and colleagues whose fame, rather than being cut short by their deaths, seems to have increased. The friend most closely connected with this crisis of immortality is Delmore Schwartz, whose first collection of poetry ensured his fame and whose inability to match this initial achievement signalled a tragic decline. Schwartz's work and his connection to *The Dream Songs* will be discussed at length later in this thesis. Suffice to say here that Schwartz's relationship with Berryman demonstrates the latter's ambivalence towards immortality, both in the sense of fame beyond one's death, and of death itself. In Berryman's poetry these two concepts develop an uneasy contiguity.

In Chapter One I shall discuss some of the elegies which can usefully be contrasted with Berryman's, beginning with 'Lycidas', which seems arguably the historical starting point of mourning poetry in English in a comparable sense, and including *Adonais*, *In Memoriam* and 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd'. While analyses of these works inevitably draws in a diverse range of themes, I shall be focusing on the most pertinent aspects, notably the element of self that a poet allows into his elegy. This is not to include discussions of so-called confessional poetry, but rather the presentation of persona in a poem where specific personal loss is its essence. Furthermore, the experience of loss in these poems brings with it a seemingly inevitable struggle with issues of universal good, a benevolent creator, and the role of fate in the status of fame.

The struggles through which many of the voices of these noted elegies pass may be seen as precursors to the kind of psychical catharsis for Berryman's Henry in his rage against his creator and questioning of self that gives the poem its drive. My

argument in this respect centres around the notion that its poetic persona involves a kind of god-like mania — that is, the poet views all other personalities as aspects of his own image, and it is this perception that creates such difficulty for Henry when those personalities destroy themselves and when he realizes that the archetypes for this perception have betrayed him: his father and his god. By illustrating the example of earlier poets in mourning I hope to show the ways in which Berryman has taken the issue a distinct step further. In this I shall make special reference to certain works of Freud either noted by Berryman as important and influential to him or which seem particularly pertinent to a discussion of his elegiac work, as well as the work of other psychoanalytic writers and critics of Freud.

I shall continue to compare other elegies, this time by Berryman's contemporaries within the so-called Middle Generation, such as Lowell's work in *Life Studies*, Roethke's 'Elegy for Jane' and a number of other works, Jarrell's war-time poetry such as the 'Song of the Ball-Turret Gunner' and, crucially, the work and indeed the life of Delmore Schwartz, the pivotal elegiac muse for Berryman. What I hope will become apparent from these investigations into the work of Berryman's contemporaries is that he cannot be seen realistically as part of any 'school' or collective with any accord or policy on the nature or purpose of poetry. Berryman has been compared with Lowell, Roethke and Plath among others by numerous critics, but one would be stretching a point to suggest any real creative alignment between these figures, certainly not in stylistic comparability, if not thematically. Stephen Matterson suggests that the Middle Generation poets are all dealing with loss, and contextually this makes sense, but Matterson also has to concede that Berryman and Lowell are poles apart stylistically.[14] I shall explain in Chapter Two that Berryman's 'epistemology of loss' is unlike Lowell's in its scope and intention.[15] Furthermore, Berryman's thematic preoccupation is not simply with an abstract notion of loss, but with specific personal loss, with grief and guilt. Matterson also recognizes a difficulty

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[14]Stephen Matterson, *Berryman and Lowell: the Art of Losing* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 13
[15]John Berryman, 'The Ball Poem', in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Charles Thornbury (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 11 (first publ. in *The Dispossessed* (New York: William Sloane, 1948)).

in comparison between the early work of Berryman and Lowell, since Lowell achieved some fame with his early collection, *Lord Weary's Castle*, whereas Berryman's fame was longer in arriving. Aside from Lowell's achievement, Berryman's early struggles present difficulties of their own; but his movement towards an elegiac tone can be traced, despite the tendency to derivativeness in the earliest work of *The Dispossessed*. In Chapter Three I shall explore the elegiac in this early work up to and including *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, as well as tracing the formation of his style which seems to have become fully formed in *The Dream Songs*; from the often flat tone and the nods to Auden and Yeats that can be seen in poems from *The Dispossessed* such as '1 September 1939' and 'The Animal Trainer', through the nascent experimentation, firstly within a traditional framework in *Berryman's Sonnets* and then in a newly devised form and with a radical style in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, which gives the biggest hint of what is to come in terms of diction, the uses of persona and the presence of self.

This exploration of his early work is partly intended to show that the elegiac in Berryman's poetry is not something happened upon, nor simply occasioned by deaths of those close to him, but stems from something more fundamental in his creative make-up. In Chapter Four I will look centrally at the elegiac poems of *The Dream Songs*, in the light of those elegiac works I will have hitherto mentioned, focusing on the role of Henry as an articulator of grief, initially for the number of poets and friends who died during the composition of the poem, but also attacking in some more depth the root of Berryman's drive to elegize, wherein I believe he unifies two discrete centres of psychological distress: the mania and dysfunction engendered by the loss of a father, and the simultaneous fear of and wish for death and release from suffering. Of course these complex issues are interdependent and in many senses one may be explained in terms of the other. I believe Berryman achieves a synthesis of these two connected crises by emphasizing the self as the ultimate object of its own grief. The loss of the father, which is wearily reiterated by Henry throughout the poem as the source of all his discontent, may be seen as a kind of 'mirror stage' in the

progress of mourning, when the elegist's consciousness is suddenly but imperfectly realized and thereafter distorts all self-image such that Henry, or the lost persona of whom Henry is a tragi-comic facade, can never function as an entirely independent entity.[16] In this sense Berryman is justified in his protestations that Henry is not simply himself in verse. Henry is fictional characterization laid bare, since all that constitutes him is a series of psychological distortions; he is not a character who grieves but is the very notion of grief. He cannot usefully mourn those who die around him since he is too fractured, too incomplete to mourn with any distance, so that his mourning is ultimately addressed only to himself. My ultimate analysis of the elegies centres around a further notion of unification, which is expanded upon in Chapter Five. This chapter introduces *The Dream Songs* as a heterogeneous but dedicated epitomization of the elegiac urge and the crises involved in grief and mourning. While emphasizing the remarkable scope of the Songs in tone and content I will argue for a recognition of the entire poem as a kind of elegy in itself, or rather that the drive towards an elegiac mode is the drive that brought about the poem from its outset. The integrity of the elegies to the pattern of the Songs is more than camouflage, and each elegy may be seen as a reminder of Henry's purpose, which is to embody grief; and as a character representation of the anger and guilt precipitated by loss, he serves on a psychotherapeutic and metaphysical level to resolve himself out of existence. The fact that Henry 'dies' a number of times in the poem is indicative of the depth of grief he represents and the trauma involved in this resolution.

In Chapter Six I will enlarge upon the matter of the self-object relation and how it connects with elegy by looking at an element of *The Dream Songs* which I believe draws in a number of themes already discussed and confirms that Berryman's

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16 'The *mirror stage* is a drama [...] which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopedic - and lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alientating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development. [...] This fragmented body [...] usually manifests itself in dreams when the movement of the analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration of the individual.' Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the 'I' in the Psychoanalytic Experience', in *Ecrits: a selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), p. 4 (Compare this with Song 195: 'I stalk my mirror down this corridor').

use of elegy is challengingly novel and distinct from the work of predecessors and contemporaries, the use of the minstrel tradition. The minstrel is used by Berryman as a supremely ironic figure to represent mourning, as a metaphor for lost identity, as well as a comment on culture, American-ness, and as a source of defamiliarization regarding the poetic diction perhaps associated with elegy. With certain illustrations from works on the minstrel tradition and on anthropological issues (especially Robert Toll's study of 1974, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* and Carl Wittke's *Tambo and Bones*, which is noted by Haffenden as Berryman's principal source on minstrelsy), I will suggest that Berryman's analysis of the subject was unlikely to be confined to a single study.[17] I intend to show that concepts from African and African-American culture involving attitudes towards death, dreams and beliefs in the spiritual world are central to Berryman's own view of these subjects, even down to the poem's title. In this sense the elegiac becomes tied intrinsically to the overall ideas the Songs bring about. The Songs and their elegies become fused in a way that surpasses the traditions from which they derive, encompassing not simply mourning and its ceremonial processes but reflecting them in the mind of its character and indeed in the modern creative mind; in its adoption of minstrelsy the poem seems simultaneously to be emphasizing its American genesis while drawing upon ancient or seemingly alien archetypes for its view of death, and the need to mourn.

Henry's incompleteness, which is discussed in Chapter Four, is connected not only to these questions of the minstrel identity but to Berryman's work subsequent to *The Dream Songs*, particularly his collection *Love & Fame*, in which his language is divested of its characteristic complexity and instead presents an image of persona without the prismatic distortions of self in pronoun and voice. In Chapter Seven I will show that the elegiac continues in Berryman's poetry beyond Henry, into *Love & Fame*, expressing mourning through reminiscence and recollection of a youthful self culminating in the extinction of this persona through Christian redemption. While this

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[17]Robert Toll, *Blacking up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Carl Wittke, *Tambo & Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1930).

collection was widely criticized, and is certainly unconvincing in the organization of its themes and development of meaning, it can still be seen as appropriate to the scheme of persona developed, perhaps to culmination, in *The Dream Songs*.

My conclusion will draw attention to the crucial arguments raised by this examination of the role of elegy, centrally the interconnection between the status of self in *The Dream Songs* and the disparate themes within it which have been perceived as symptoms of the poem's disorganized heterogeneity, but which I believe may be unified by viewing the poem in its entirety as the product of an elegiac urge, a compulsion to mourn presented as a manically disturbed and fractured persona. This compulsive character, Henry, questions his own consciousness in his willingness to take on the universal grief of his generation. Even when he does not mourn he represents mourning, since the archetypal, 'irreversible' loss of his father is what has caused the creation of such an incohesive and unstable persona. Berryman's assumption of such a character to express mourning demonstrates his mastery of an inherent paradox of elegy. In distancing himself through Henry, he achieves a supreme psychological intimacy; Henry allows Berryman to show that loss brings consciousness itself into question, that to experience the loss of another's life can obscure an explicit sense of self. Berryman's achievement is to make elegy fundamental to his poetics, and to use complexity of persona not to obfuscate but to personalize elegy. He draws the themes of his work from the constructive exigencies of mourning, showing an understanding that the loss which inspires elegy abuts on all the material at a poet's disposal. In this sense, the construction of elegy is Berryman's life's work.

Chapter One
'My Destined Urn': Elegies of Milton, Whitman, Tennyson and others with reference to Berryman.

The essential purpose of the following comparative examinations of elegy is to highlight Berryman's centring of mourning, within a poetics of the modern self, a position which has clear antecedents, but on which his major poetry rests with a greater conclusivity than in those works compared. As set out in the introduction, the distinguishing aspect of Berryman's elegizing is the derivation of elegy from the very principles that guide his poetics as a whole. Whereas elegies have seemed, by their nature, occasional works, Berryman allows a sense of mourning to permeate the structural and theoretical design of his poetry, to apparent completeness in *The Dream Songs*.

Nevertheless it may be remarked that along with Berryman's deviations from accumulated and now standard patterns of the elegiac come echoes of the formal and stylistic deviations of his predecessors; that is to say, stylistic, formal and conceptual idiosyncrasies have become standards of their own, the parameters of which Berryman works both within and without. Often these perceived subversions of the norm may be re-evaluated as problems of interpretation either of the individual work or of elegy itself and its ultimate role and purpose. The immediate assessment of this role is of course that it is to mourn, yet the ambiguity involved here is not new, and in some senses it is as much a source of dispute as with the most contentious of modern elegies. Part of what I suggest Berryman has done is that his presentation of the elegiac in his work is inclusive of its tradition and operates in dialogue with it. While his elegies exhibit seemingly irreconcilable aggressivity towards God, fate and even the mourned object, they also include self-consciously emotive lyricism, occasionally quasi-pastoral references, and crucially a reflection on the life of the elegist, the fate and fame of the mourning survivor. The continued self-centredness of elegy is so fundamental and pervasive that I would not attempt to claim any originality for

Berryman in respect of it. What he does, however, is to treat elegy as his occupation, even his frame of mind, in a work whose subject and core is the life of the poet, in the midst of death.

This inwardness of elegy in respect of its author and object is touched upon in Carey and Fowler's notes to Milton's *Poems*, where they set out a number of critical stances regarding the 'subject of 'Lycidas':

> Tillyard [...] claims that King is only the nominal subject of 'Lycidas': fundamentally the poem concerns M[ilton] himself. Mindful of the similarity between King's career and his own, he writes in fear of premature death. The 'real subject' is the resolving of that fear [...] into an exalted state of mental calm. Similarly Tuve [...] views 'Lycidas' as 'the most poignant and controlled statement in English poetry of the acceptance of that in the human condition which seems to man unacceptable.[1]

They continue, outlining John Crowe Ransom's essay of 1933 which argues that Milton disturbs the 'anonymity' of Renaissance poetry in various ways,

> stylistically, in that M[ilton] departs from the Virgilian grand style in the St. Peter's passage, where he shows a M[ilton] 'who is angry, violent, and perhaps a little obscene'; and from the viewpoint of 'the logic of composition', in that M[ilton] starts his elegy as monologue but then breaks into narrative [...] 'and the narrative breaks the monologue several times more, presenting action sometimes in the present tense, sometimes in the past.'[2]

Ransom's identification of the disruption in 'Lycidas' of a perceived decorum may be indirectly transferred to an observation of Berryman's own disruptions: one might also regard the speaker of *The Dream Songs* as 'angry, violent, and perhaps a little obscene', and the logic of composition is similarly disturbed, oscillating between monologue and narrative, present and past tense. The elegies of *The Dream Songs* are clearly not modelled in any specific sense on 'Lycidas', but at the same time Berryman had a great interest in the poem and its implications for the situation of elegy, as can be seen by his short story 'Wash Far Away', originally drafted in 1957. In it, an English professor recovering from the death of his wife and reflecting on the death of his best friend, recalls the day that he 'began his deeper—deepest—acquaintance with "Lycidas"', in a seminar on the poem that leads to an epiphany of

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[1] *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. by John Carey & Alastair Fowler, (London: Longmans, 1968), p. 234.
[2] ibid., p. 235.

awareness of its meaning.[3] Berryman uses the dialogue between the professor and his students as a dramatized synthesis of opinion comparable to those of Ransom and Tillyard quoted above:

> 'It's about his friend's death isn't it?' Wright duly said. 'No!' Landes's high, confident voice broke out. 'It's about Milton himself. In other words, it has a subject he felt very strongly about, and it's very emotional whenever it comes to him or things that interested him. King was just the occasion. If his cat had died instead, the poem would have been just as good.'
>
> 'Hardly his cat,' said the professor, 'though Gray did well enough. But I agree with you that the poem is not on the whole passionate about King.'[4]

The structure of the story is in part a corollary of the argumentative structure of 'Lycidas', the academic's personal reflections mirroring the poem's seemingly selfish digressions, the academic discussion resembling the poem's politicized attack on the clergy, the professor's final serenity matching the poet's — the resolution into Tillyard's 'exalted state of mental calm', as shown in the final passage:

> The professor sat a long time in his office, not thinking of anything and perhaps not unhappy, before he went home. [...] He felt older than he had in the morning, but he had moved into the exacting conviction that he was...something...not dead.[5]

Lea Baechler, in her essay on the story, notes similar correspondences, although she bases the connection to an elegiac tradition primarily on Berryman's personal biography, through the fictionalized allusion to his friend Bhain Campbell, presented in the story as 'Hugh':

> The two subtexts — the renascent interpretation of 'Lycidas', through which Berryman apprehends that 'magnificent' poem's impact on him both poetically and personally, and the elegiac movement in the story towards a life-affirming consolation with regard to Campbell's death — are intricately meshed in a narrative of chronological and thematic complexity.[6]

She draws attention to the 'parallels between specific points of narrative time and specific events in Berryman's life'.[7] Berryman's use of biographical material is less

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[3] John Berryman, *The Freedom of the Poet* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1976), p. 367.
[4] *The Freedom of the Poet*, p. 377.
[5] ibid., p. 386.
[6] Lea Baechler, 'A "Deeper — Deepest — Acquaintance" with the Elegy: John Berryman and "Wash Far Away"', in *Recovering Berryman*, ed. by Richard J. Kelly and Alan K. Lathrop (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 125-140 (p. 127).
[7] ibid.

important, I would suggest, than his empathy with the text and its elegiac purpose. Rather than 'Lycidas' elucidating the personal significance in Berryman's art, he allows instead a situation and argumentative pattern in his story, drawn from the personal, to demonstrate the transformative power of Milton's elegy. As Douglas Bush says of 'Lycidas', 'the personal is soon absorbed into the universal.'[8] Similarly Berryman takes the personal experience alluded to by Baechler and puts it in the light of 'Lycidas', which allows the story to transcend those particularities towards a universalized conclusion that is not diluted in emotional intimacy — exactly what Milton's work brings about.

Berryman's artistic empathy with Milton seems not to be in doubt, as 'Wash Far Away' demonstrates, and what he draws from 'Lycidas' is as notable as the further steps he takes in dealing with the politics of the elegy. Such is Berryman's consideration of 'Lycidas' that in *The Dream Songs* he takes its influential position as standard. While there is no direct echo of pastoral scene (indeed the Songs are remarkably lacking in external physical scenery altogether), certain passages of elegy have a pastoral flavour, although Baechler's extensions of this comparison seem a little tenuous, in regard to the Songs' sequence of elegies to Schwartz: 'The opening lines of the sequence, "These lovely motions of the air, the breeze" and 'Henry's bird of paradise vestures" (Dream Song 146), followed in Dream Song 147 by 'High in the summer branches the poet sang," all provide the initial pastoral contextualization conventionally associated with the elegy.'[9] The last quotation here seems less associated with pastoral convention than with Berryman's personal symbolism, an image set out at the very beginning of the Songs: 'Once in a sycamore I was glad | all at the top, and I sang.'(Song 1). The similarities between the two works need not be forced in order to prove Berryman's awareness of his predecessor's example. Moreover, this awareness may be taken for granted, and it is Berryman's novel treatment of those elegiac themes with which Milton deals that is of central concern. The issue with which Milton is importantly preoccupied is the aforementioned fame

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8 *Milton: Poetical Works*, ed. by Douglas Bush(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 142.
9 Baechler, p. 134.

of the mourner, and this also pervades the mourning in *The Dream Songs*. Berryman's approach, however, is to place the Songs' expression of grief within the context of Henry's ongoing crisis of identity. While Milton fears for the fragility of his own poetic career in his identification with the talented and young King, Berryman uses the ironic distancing of Henry to emphasize the same fragility, as in Song 147:

> Henry's mind grew blacker the more he thought.
> He looked onto the world like the act of an aged whore.
> Delmore, Delmore.
> He flung to pieces and they hit the floor.[...]
>
> High in the summer branches the poet sang.
> Hís throat ached, and he could sing no more
> All ears closed
> across the heights where Delmore & Gertrude sprang
> so long ago, in the goodness of which it was composed.
> Delmore, Delmore!

By placing Henry alongside the image and memory of Schwartz, Berryman stresses the literariness of both in this context. He creates an identification with his object of grief that draws attention to the poem's artifice, the lyrical refrain of Schwartz's name being simultaneously a poeticization of an actual name correspondent to the imaginary Henry, and the simplest expression of grief. The resolving point of this is that ironically the name is all Henry has left, since the person of Delmore is lost; he is now as much a spectre of the text as Henry. Underneath the expression of grief, Berryman memorializes Schwartz as a literary artefact, because once dead, that is all he can be.

The professor of 'Wash Far Away' at one point defends the emotional integrity of 'Lycidas', quoting the lines 'But O the heavy change, now thou art gone, | Now thou art gone, and never must return!', when the student Landes questions its passion towards King. This disagreement seems to enact an ambivalence about Milton's intention, and more widely about the motives involved in elegy. The ambivalence of the elegist is something Berryman seems to grapple with in a very direct way, for instance in Song 36:

> The high ones die, die. They die. You look up and who's there?
> —Easy, easy Mr Bones. I is on your side.

I smell your grief.
—I sent my grief away. I cannot care
forever. With them all again & again I died
and cried, and I have to live.

He expresses a belief that the position of the mourning surviving poet is itself contradictory, since his identification with the lost figure extends to their death; he is unsatisfied in the fame of the living, envious of the fame and even the status of the dead ('With them all again & again I died | and cried, and I have to live.'(36)). Like Milton, he questions the Muse that disregards the life of the promising poet and doubts the worth of continuing if only death can bring fame. Milton puts it as: 'Alas! what boots it with uncessant care | To tend the homely slighted shepherd's trade, | And strictly meditate the thankless Muse?'(l. 66). Milton's mourning shepherd is reminded by Phoebus that 'Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil'(l. 78). But Henry's dissatisfaction extends to a more obsessive degree, whereupon he bemoans his very existence, feeling that he should not only cease as a poet, but cease to live, to take the above remarks of Phoebus' literally. The almost literal envy of the dead can be seen a number of times through the Songs, touched upon or put explicitly. In Song 18, 'A Strut for Roethke', Henry's friend parenthetically remarks on Roethke's death: 'O lucky fellow, eh Bones?' Song 26 involves a complex dialogue between Henry and his friend:

—What happen then, Mr Bones?
you seems excited-like.
—Fell Henry back into the original crime: art, rime [...]
—What happen then, Mr Bones?
—I had a most marvellous piece of luck. I died.

One of the Schwartz elegies, Song 156, concludes:

The spirit & the joy, in memory
live of him on, the young will read his young verse
for as long as such things go:
why then do I despair, miserable Henry
who *knew* him all so long, for better & worse
and nearly would follow him below.

Here Berryman seems to express doubt even in Schwartz's immortality. His feeling that the young will read Schwartz's verse 'for as long as such things go' is no

consolation, since it is no real immortality. This seems to answer 'miserable' Henry's question as to why he despairs; it is because unlike the comforting voice of Phoebus in 'Lycidas', Henry receives no consolation, is not reconciled with the Muse, and this is what sets *The Dream Songs* apart. His understanding of his grief, his anger at loss is incomplete, never fully resolved. He never realizes any rapprochement with a destructive deity as Milton does. While the final Dream Song seems to signal a hope of spiritual rebirth in the figure of 'my heavy daughter', and hints at Milton's recovery from grief to find 'fresh woods, and pastures new', it still maintains a pessimism at its heart: 'Everywhere in enormous numbers turkeys will be dying | and other birds, all their wings.' This line seems to echo the image of Schwartz as a singing bird: 'High in the summer branches the poet sang.' But in Song 385 it is not summer, but autumn, Thanksgiving, when turkeys will be eaten 'everywhere': 'Fall comes to us as a prize | to rouse us toward our fate.' The punning use of 'fall' is crucial here, suggesting that Henry's envy of the dead can come to fruition when his fall from innocence, the beginning of his guilt ('Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought.'(1)) becomes the gift of inevitable extinction, the 'prize'. Even his appreciation of material comfort is tempered by comparison with his sense of human fragility: 'My house is made of wood and it's made well, | unlike us.' Berryman's transformation of the elegiac, then, involves the desire not simply to bemoan fame and fate as the preserve of the immortal, but to foreground the questioning even of immortality which the elegist must address in his creation of a poem that mourns the loss of one with which the poet identifies so strongly. In his use of Henry, Berryman gives this identification a new psychological explicitness, accentuating the consideration of career that the writing of elegy engenders, and projecting this fear for the self not through the pastoral guise but through a voice that is at times obscure and imperceptible, and at others brutally honest.

In *Adonais*, Shelley mourns the loss of Keats with an ambivalence comparable to Milton's, and of course 'Lycidas' was a model for Shelley's elegy. He also hints at fear for the immortality of poetry itself that Berryman more explicitly remarks upon in

Song 156 quoted above. In stanza I the poet compels time itself to mourn and console for Adonais' loss with belief in posterity: '"[...] till the Future dares | Forget the past, his fate and fame shall be | An echo and a light unto eternity!"' The suggestion here is that at some point the future *will* forget the past, and Keats's memory will be lost. Shelley combines such uncertain consolation with a more noticeable emphasis on the work of nature, and the physical processes of mourning and of death. The cycle of death and rebirth is arranged in the poem to correspond with the cycle of grief and recovery. The atheist Shelley seems to disguise a direct confrontation with a destructive God by placing greater stress on the earthly renewal of life, connecting Keats's death with organic regeneration that goes beyond Milton's 'pastures new' to imply a kind of Platonic pantheism:

> Ah, woe is me! Winter is come and gone,
> But grief returns with the revolving year;
> The airs and streams renew their joyous tone;
> The ants, the bees the swallows reappear;
> Fresh leaves and flowers deck the dead Season's bier;
> The amorous birds now pair in every brake.(XVIII)

In stanza xx, the poet seems keen to show his willingness to face the reality of death without recourse to the amelioration of the pastoral guise, or of religious euphemism:

> The leprous corpse, touched by this spirit tender,
> Exhales itself in flowers of gentle breath;
> Like incarnations of the stars, when splendour
> Is changed to fragrance, they illumine death
> And mock the merry worm that wakes beneath.

The harshness of Shelley's physical realism is tempered by a transcendent perception of states of existence, but one expressed in terms more vaguely spiritual than philosophical: 'Awake him not! Surely he takes his fill | Of deep and liquid rest, forgetful of all ill'(VII). Yet the stanza that contains this is paradoxically both consoling and cynical, suggesting a commentary on the brutality of the living world, giving life such an ugly, death-like state as to imply an envy for the dead, prefiguring the physicality of Berryman's expressed envy:

> Peace, peace! he is not dead, he doth not sleep—
> He hath awakened from the dream of life—
> 'Tis we, who lost in stormy visions, keep

> With phantoms an unprofitable strife,
> And in mad trance, strike with our spirit's knife
> Invulnerable nothings (XXXIX).

Keats is regarded as being safe from the 'contagion of the world's slow stain'(XL). As in *The Dream Songs*, Shelley reflects on other deaths of which he is reminded by the loss of Keats. *Adonais* reflects on the other young poets dead before their rightful time: Chatterton, Sidney and Lucan are referred to as 'inheritors of unfulfilled renown'(XLV). Berryman perceives his generation as similarly unfulfilled, yet where he differs in this respect is in the directness of the voice's grief, despite the mask of Henry; the incorporation of loss and elegy into a framework of poetic life that does not diminish its own elegiac intensity, not just placing elegy into a quotidian scene, the daily life of the mind, but stressing the elegiac in that life. Carlos Baker notes the sense of isolation Shelley expresses at the loss of a contemporary in whose fate he sees his own:

> [Shelley's] own loneliness and separateness from the other mourners are emphasized because of his feeling [...] that whereas there had been, until recently, two poets whose efforts went unappreciated, he alone survived. Of the four mourners, Shelley was the only one 'who in another's fate now wept his own.'[10]

Baker remarks further on the question of personal closeness to the figure mourned, raised in *Adonais* in the form of the mourning shepherds who represent contemporaries of Keats, something which aroused criticism of Berryman in his elegies to those artists he did not know personally:

> It is of little consequence that only one of this quartet [Byron, Moore, Hunt, Shelley] had a real personal friendship with Keats. Shelley is merely suggesting that the loss of any promising poet from the ranks of modern literature is a sufficient reason for mourning among his contemporaries.[11]

It is clear that, in the wake of modernism, two horrific world wars and the decline of Christianity, Berryman had to speak about death in a different register to Milton or Shelley, and yet elegy itself dwells on the recurrence of loss, the immutability of death and of how we experience it; so despite the cultural leap from Shelley to

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[10] Carlos Baker, *Shelley's Major Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 243.
[11] ibid., footnote.

Berryman, Shelley's emphasis on the cyclical quality of life and death imaged in the natural world may be aligned with *The Dream Songs*' psychological cycle. In turn this is physically represented in the movement of Henry through the world, his 'departure' from the sycamore in Song 1 to the autumnal growth of his daughter in Song 385. Moreover the disjointedness of Henry's characterization illustrates a complex pattern of cause and effect, stemming from the irreversible loss that Henry has suffered at his outset. Harry Thomas suggests that the birth of Henry coincides with the death of Berryman's father, and the spiritual death of Berryman himself, who is unable to mourn properly in the light of what he regards as betrayal by his immediate creator — his father — and by God for allowing this to happen.[12] This touches on themes of perhaps greater depth than Thomas explores, and is too elaborately and definitively constructed to allow any interpretation of the poem to breathe, but it does highlight the relevance of rebirth, the force of nature in a poem that does not overly exhibit a concern with the natural scene. Song 1 seems to hint at a paradisiacal state, presaging Henry's ensuing misfortunes:

> All the world like a woolen lover
> once did seem on Henry's side.
> Then came a departure.
> Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought.

From a comforting period of illusory bliss, when the world bore the maternal, sentimental cast of 'a woolen lover', Henry experiences 'a departure'; the broad suggestiveness of the word hints at changes of many kinds to be encountered, and the line that follows it implies that they will be changes for the worse, failures and mistakes in fact, bound by a damning pattern of loss, an unchangeable fate. The singer of *The Dream Songs* recognizes his duty to experience death recurrently through the loss of friends and contemporaries, and ultimately through his own end. Angela Leighton's remarks on the birth of Adonais compare with this view of the birth of Henry, but whereas Henry's appearance reflects the beginning of creativity in grief, Leighton argues that the writing is an end rather than a beginning:

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[12] Harry Thomas, *Berryman's Understanding* (Introduction) (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), i-xxi (pp. xix-xx).

> This is a poem which laments the loss of Keats, but which expresses that loss in terms of the lost voice or breath that first created poems. Such creativity is therefore not only Keats's but Shelley's own. The meaning of Keats's death is closely linked to the death of grief and the death of inspiration which marks the writing of this poem.[13]

Like Shelley, Berryman wants to show the realities of death behind the mystic euphemism that has been part of elegy, but like Shelley, he frequently strays into the hinterland between religious mystery and rational scepticism. In the fluctuating moods of the Songs he brings an idiosyncratic approach to both the earthly and the spiritual, as in the surreal atmosphere of Song 146, where Henry is a hapless figure surrounded by corpses; he is confused by the abundance of death despite the persistence of nature: 'These lovely motions of the air, the breeze, | Tell me I'm not in hell, though round me the dead | lie in their limp postures.'

Along with Whitman, Tennyson is perhaps the most useful figure of comparison with Berryman concerning elegy and the other aspects of poetry that a discussion of elegy inevitably brings with it, particularly regarding the question of the self as figured in the work, the dramatic presentation of character and of mourning itself. Structurally, Tennyson's *In Memoriam A.H.H.* is probably the most similar poem to *The Dream Songs*. Both are composed of a collection of short lyrics which, while being varied in style and broad in scope, return to central themes. The apparent uncertainty of both poems' planning and arrangement seems also to link them; Tennyson remarked that 'I did not write them with any view of weaving them into a whole, or for publication, until I found I had written so many.'[14] According to Haffenden, Berryman experienced 'exasperating [...] efforts to weld the Dream Songs into a form. They seemed resistant to any possible shape or scheme.'[15] Berryman himself made a number of attempts to organize the work after he had written most of the published songs. Haffenden cites one of these instances where Berryman drew comparisons between *The Dream Songs* and the *Iliad*, but remarks that 'there is

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[13] Angela Leighton, *Shelley and the Sublime: an Interpretation of the Major Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 125.
[14] Cited in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London: Longmans, 1969), p. 859.
[15] *Life*, p. 309.

clearly much that is *a posteriori* about these approximations, and despite his efforts to categorize the Songs, the importance of the *Iliad* to Berryman's sense of structure remained a matter of example rather than of strict equivalence.'[16] Both *The Dream Songs* and the *Iliad* certainly possess a comparable structure, but need not be constrained by any rigid symmetry. As Jack Barbera notes, 'the whole poem's "ultimate structure" is the ongoing and epic enterprise of probing and expressing [Henry's] character — without, at the same time, developing some narrative action with a grand finale.'[17] He also suggests that Song 293, whose design is '"not cliffhangers or old serials | but according to his nature" [...] exemplifies that the poem was not written according to some preconceived design.'[18] The stanza hints at the playfulness of imputing grand design for the bemusement of academics:

> What gall had he in him, so to begin Book VII
> or to design, out of its hotspur materials,
> its ultimate structure
> whereon will critics browse at large, at Heaven Eleven
> finding it was not cliffhangers or old serials
> but according to his nature.

In his *Paris Review* interview Berryman discusses the level of planning that went into the structure and composition of the poem:

> The narrative such as it is developed as I went along, partly out of my gropings into and around Henry and his environment and associates, partly out of my readings in theology and that sort of thing [...] and third, out of certain partly preconceived and partly developing as I went along, sometimes rigid and sometimes plastic, structural notions. [...] Finally I left the poem open to the circumstances of my personal life. For example, obviously if I hadn't got a Guggenheim and decided to spend it in Dublin, most of book VII would not exist.[19]

The lack of a rigorously pre-arranged structural or integrating scheme for such large undertakings as these two poems seems hard for some to accept, as if it suggests that the work is of less literary or intellectual value because of its apparent haphazardness. Michael Mason suggests that 'Tennyson may have conceived the idea of one long

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16 *Commentary* p. 57.
17 Jack V. Barbera, 'Shape and Flow in *The Dream Songs*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 22 (1976), 146-162 (p. 155).
18 ibid.
19 Stitt, p. 191.

poem about Hallam's death as early as 1834, and it is likely that he soon started to arrange its components so that the "moods of sorrow" were "dramatically given"'[20]. Certainly Tennyson was composing the parts of the poem often in a single manuscript volume (the *Trinity* and later the *Lincoln* MSS, as described by Ricks[21]), but it does not naturally follow that he considered them at that stage as a single piece. The structure and composition of *In Memoriam* and *The Dream Songs* has a significant pertinence to the reader's appreciation of their authors' respective poetics, and it should not reflect badly on either poet that their most significant works came about cumulatively, without the specific end in sight when they began. Such an approach does not mean that the themes pursued in the work are of casual significance; simply that the poet is not necessarily working in a straight line, creatively speaking.

The revision and enhancement of the themes that emerge throughout *In Memoriam* can be seen in the Prologue, which was added to the collection at a very late stage, and which encapsulates the tension between religious faith and doubt that underlies the poem. The doubt of the Prologue is perhaps deceptive since it generally emphasizes providence and the need for absolute faith in acceptance of the vagaries of life and death, and inexplicable tragedy. Yet at the same time the expression of faith betrays the uncertainty and confusion that underpins the acceptance of fate. For example, the line 'Believing where we cannot prove' is a testament in one sense to supreme faith, but the expressions of acceptance in the prologue are notable for their apparent omissions: 'He [man] thinks he was not made to die, | And thou hast made him: thou art just.' The colon of the second line is a sort of ellipsis of faith; the reader knows that the poet is dealing with the tragic death of a young man, and the line implies that the poet cannot comprehend how God could take Hallam, having made him so well. That man 'thinks he was not made to die' suggests two things: firstly that man is born with an arrogant belief in his own immortality; and secondly, that he might rightly believe that man was not created only to be destroyed in his prime. The

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[20]Michael Mason, 'The timing of *In Memoriam*' in *Studies in Tennyson,* ed. by Hallam Tennyson (London: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 155-168 (p. 160).
[21]Ricks, *The Poems of Tennyson*, p. 857-8.

questioning of God implicit in the line is balanced by what follows the colon: 'thou art just.' Tennyson disguises his anger at God's removal of Hallam within unimpeachable encomium. The poet comments on the transience of earthly life, emphasizing humility: 'Our little systems have their day.' While such a tone cannot bring faith into question of itself, it is the context of later parts that makes this resolution (since this is as much an epilogue as a prologue) problematical. The fact that the expressions of doubt give rise to some of the strongest lines in the poem can be added to this problem. His verse seems to have greater power when dealing with the physical world of death and rebirth, which he does in an often deceptively graphic manner:

> Old Yew, which graspest at the stones
> That name the under-lying dead,
> Thy fibres net the dreamless head,
> Thy roots are wrapt about the bones. (II)

This compares well with later metaphysical abstractions, such as:

> I wage not any feud with Death
> For changes wrought on form and face;
> No lower life that earth's embrace
> May breed with him, can fright my faith.(LXXXII)

The reconciliation with Death in the latter stanza seems a pale echo of the former; 'roots' that are 'wrapt about thy bones' are replaced with 'earth's embrace'. And canto II ends with a vision of the poet united with nature in a quite visceral sense:

> And gazing on thee, sullen tree,
> Sick for thy stubborn hardihood,
> I seem to fail from out my blood
> And grow incorporate into thee.

In LXXXII Tennyson suggests instead a resistance to the pull of death, which is equated with nature, and a determination that nothing in the 'lower life [...] can fright my faith'. Tennyson's philosophical vacillation in this respect is one of the characteristic features of *In Memoriam*, and something that arises necessarily out of the nature of the poem's composition. While the poem has no real systematic narrative organization, the presentation of its moods, the process of mourning, have

the quality of a progression of character more typical of narrative. At the same time all the component poems can stand alone as lyrics in their own right, even if some are inferior in quality to others, and the cumulative effect of reading the whole poem is more impressive.

Much the same can be said of *The Dream Songs*, even taking into account the temporal and cultural gap between the composition of the two poems. While Berryman insisted that it be read as one poem, he published its parts separately, first as single poems and then as two volumes; as Barbera notes, '*The Dream Songs* is open-ended: open to Berryman's life and ended by an act of his will and, irrevocably, by his death. One could say the poem stops rather than ends: this in contrast to long poems which complete some narrative or logical design.'[22] It might be suggested that long poems written in this way have a greater life and organic dynamism than if they had been prepared with 'logical design'. The poet cannot know where his creativity is going to take him, but the potential aimlessness of this approach can be remedied by anchoring the life of the poem within the life of the poet. While there may be no climax or denouement, the reflection of experience in the language of poetry provides the signposts the reader would expect if required to treat these works as a single long poem. Some other problems, however, do arise in the work of both poets; that is, the danger that they repeat themselves when they have no temporal pattern to work through. Tennyson delineates his poem to some extent by punctuating it with Christmases and depictions of the time of year; but he can be found going over similar ground at different stages, not genuinely building an image, but largely repeating what he said earlier. For instance, he mentions the 'dark yew, that graspest at the stones | and dippest toward the dreamless head' in XXXIX, which mostly repeats what is said in II (Old Yew, which graspest at the stones[...]Thy fibres net the dreamless head'). Berryman's poems set in Ireland have some similar repetitions; Song 291 begins 'Cold & golden lay the high heroine | in a wilderness of bears', and Song 302 begins with exactly the same sentence; one presumes this is a mistake, or else a rather weak

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[22]Barbera, p. 147.

effect, perhaps to encourage re-reading.

The reader may assume these repetitions are passing weaknesses or oversights, since Tennyson is certainly aware of the possibilities of language, which he demonstrates when discussing the cathartic power of verse writing; in canto V, for example, he anticipates many later theoretical treatments of language and its relationship with meaning and the writer's intentions: 'For words, like Nature, half reveal | And half conceal the soul within.' The poet illustrates his own point with the numerous phrases and obscurities of the work that have led to critical dispute, such as 'Behind the veil, behind the veil'(LVI).

A great deal of conjecture has also arisen from the many ambiguous expressions of genuine love for Hallam, which have led to questions of homosexuality. There is at first an analogy of the 'happy lover' in VIII who finds his love 'gone and far from home'. The magic of special places they used to visit together has been lost:

> So find I every pleasant spot
> In which we two were wont to meet,
> The field, the chamber and the street,
> For all is dark where thou art not.

There is an element of the recurrent selfishness of mourning expressed in the phrase 'my forsaken heart' in line 18 and the not obviously explicable guilt that attends such grief 'in my deep regret' in line 17. The various meanings of 'regret' (suggestive of apology or missed opportunity as well as sorrow) make the speaker's situation an ambiguous one. The subsequent canto, while initially reminiscent of 'Lycidas' in its reference to the 'ocean-plains | With my lost Arthur's loved remains' (this is also concordant with the facts of Hallam's death and the transportation of his body) has some similarly curious phrasing, referring to Hallam as 'dear as the mother to the son, | More than my brothers are to me'. A later canto combines a moment of physical love, spiritual love, and religious sacrifice: 'I, falling on his faithful heart, | Would breathing through his lips impart | The life that almost dies in me.' Earlier in his life Tennyson had remarked on the inappropriateness of Shakespeare's Sonnets in

addressing a man with such love poetry. It seems that he felt later that in such an instance of intense grief, that kind of expression certainly was appropriate. By comparison, there are some suggestions by biographers and critics of Berryman that his habit of stealing girlfriends from close friends showed a suppressed desire for the friends themselves. Haffenden notes that Berryman wrote to a friend: '"writers are likely to have more masked-homosexual-component around than other people, and heading for friends' wives or girls is really a way of getting closer to friends."'[23] However there is nothing approaching the sexual ambiguity of *In Memoriam* in the content of *The Dream Songs*; the elegies to Schwartz for example are full of expressions of love but they simply do not have the turn of phrase that has led to the academic gossip about Tennyson. Ricks writes that although one can read too much into a manuscript, 'anyone who believes that Tennyson's feelings for Hallam were not homosexual should try to say why.'[24] It is perhaps more important however to stress the centrality of this depth of emotion as a facet of the elegiac mode, tethering it to archetypal notions of sacrifice, heightening the poetry's emotional impact through an emphasis on the intensity of the friendship that has been lost.

One of the most distinctive qualities of *In Memoriam* is its changing moods, and the poet's willingness to question everything relating to his loss. He questions even the act of mourning or its perceived lack of purpose: 'So draw him home to those that mourn | In vain.'(IX) Berryman, at the end of his elegies to Schwartz is 'almost ready now to say goodbye.' This suggests that the process of mourning is a necessary catharsis, even if it does not solve all of Henry's problems. Tennyson here conveys a feeling of impotence, that since mourning cannot restore life, we ought not to mourn at all.

Tennyson sometimes appears to affect the simplicity of tone of Wordsworth, hinting at his potential for disentangling his often overworked versification. This streamlining almost always gives the poem a greater emotive power, perhaps as a result of its context amid more elaborately phrased parts. Tennyson is perhaps

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[23]*Life*, p. 240.
[24]Christopher Ricks, *Tennyson* (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 216.

struggling in the lack of space dictated by the tetrameter he uses, which tends towards musicality and is suggestive of a ballad tradition rather than a more stately pentameter. He falls into seemingly archaic diction apparently to fit the form, though even that is occasionally loose. The first stanza of X, however, has refreshing clarity:

> I hear the noise about thy keel;
> I hear the bell struck in the night:
> I see the cabin window bright;
> I see the sailor at the wheel.

Tennyson's control over tone seems to vary greatly; but in the above passage he finds imagery and language strong and clear enough to avoid the over-musical, and in XI he effectively uses the onomatopoeic qualities of 'calm' in soporific repetition:

> Calm is the morn without a sound,
> Calm as to suit a calmer grief,
> And only thro' the faded leaf
> The chestnut pattering to the ground:
>
> Calm and deep peace on this high wold,
> And on these dews that drench the furze,
> And all the silvery gossamers
> That twinkle into green and gold:[...]
>
> Calm on the seas, and silver sleep,
> And waves that sway themselves in rest,
> And dead calm in that noble breast
> Which heaves but with the heaving deep.

He places the word at the start of the lines so that the reversed feet slow down the rhythm to a somnolent speed. But like the refrains in 'Mariana' and 'The Lady of Shalott', the repetition becomes something of a distraction from the resonance of the sandwiched lines of autumnal imagery, closing with a sea image that has complete harmony with its subject: 'And waves that sway themselves in rest, | And dead calm in that noble breast.' The suggestion in X that the poet can mysteriously see the ship that is bringing Hallam's body from Austria is part of a continuing mystical, supernatural theme throughout the poem. XII describes an out of body experience and presents the poet as a biblical dove (Ricks notes that this was inspired by Genesis VIII 8-9[25]). Tennyson does not present this scene with any claim to metaphor or analogy;

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[25]*The Poems of Tennyson*, p. 874.

the poet simply escapes his human body:

> Like her [the dove] I go; I cannot stay;
> I leave this mortal ark behind,
> A weight of nerves without a mind,
> And leave the cliffs, and haste away.

Fashioning a simile into a revelatory flight of fancy, the poet is supposedly travelling in his mind, but the journey the reader sees is a physical, spatial one; the wail of grief is married as an image to the cry of the circling bird: 'And circle moaning in the air: | Is this the end? Is this the end?' This stanza is notable for a couple of reasons: its imagery of transcendence, of life outside flesh, is emblematic of Tennyson's larger concerns about immortality (and these concerns are unresolved and problematic, since the bodiless poet still grieves, he is not released from grief when released from his body); furthermore the repetition of 'Is this the end?' is typical of Tennyson, and also represents in miniature the cyclical quality of the entire poem, which has its own repetitions and its own life, passing through death and every thought attendant on it, to a marriage. The elegiac pattern here compares with Berryman's in its representation of the passages of grief and the questioning of a seemingly disembodied narrator, although Berryman can go further by representing an afterlife as something as tawdry and complicated as the life gone before. In Song 89, *'Op. posth. no. 12'*, for example, Henry marries a 'blue series' of wives while ensconced in his coffin:

> In the Marriage of the Dead, a new routine,
> he gasped his crowed vows past lids shut tight
> and a-many rings fumbled on.
> His coffin like Grand Central Station to the brim
> filled up & emptied with the lapse of light.

Berryman seems to stress that even in his multiplicity Henry cannot escape the sordid details of his earthly existence in the manner of *In Memoriam;* in his afterlife, Henry does not soar like a bird from his body, but lays in his grave and continues where he left off.

In the final stanza of XII Tennyson expertly marries rhythm and image, depicting the looping, diving actions of the bird: 'And forward dart again, and play | About the prow.' He continues the flying imagery in XIII: 'My fancies time to rise on

wing, | And glance about the approaching sails.' This is something of a pale echo of the previous imagery; what Tennyson does to great effect in this canto is to alter the reader's sympathies with structural technique, using an analogy and postponing its reference. He describes the 'tears of the widower' which 'fall like these' but he puts off the 'like' until the end of the stanza, so that the reader identifies with the widower before the poet, and consequently the two figures become implicitly merged. Berryman occasionally achieved a similar merging of discrete figures, but this tends to work over the poem as a whole, since the sense one gets is of a single personality that has been shattered by trauma. This is typified by Song 22, 'Of 1826':

> I am the little man who smokes & smokes.
> I am the girl who does know better but.
> I am the king of the pool.
> I am so wise I had my mouth sewn shut.
> I am a government official and a goddamned fool.
> I am a lady who takes jokes.

Tennyson's sense of schizophrenic changes in mood is suggested in XVI, where the poet starts to reflect on the unevenness of his grief and at a second level the poems he has collected here, which vary greatly in tone and content: 'Can calm despair and wild unrest | Be tenants of a single breast, | Or sorrow such a changeling be?' This canto begins the personification of Sorrow as a fickle woman that continues through the poem, notable in 'O sorrow, wilt thou live with me'(LIX). Lines 8-10 of XVI suggest perhaps an Arthurian theme: the 'dead lake' and the 'shadow' which is reminiscent of 'The Lady of Shalott' ('I am half sick of shadows'(l. 71)). The irony of Hallam's first name, Arthur, cannot have been lost on Tennyson.

Tennyson's friend, Edward Fitzgerald, rather harshly criticized the self-pity of *In Memoriam* having seen many of the poems long before publication. Tennyson appears to respond to this criticism in XXI. The travellers that come by in the poem say that 'He loves to make parade of pain, | That with his piping he may gain | The praise that comes to constancy'. The poet responds by insisting on his sincerity, and even his compulsion: 'I do but sing because I must.' This compares interestingly with Berryman, who, while eschewing the pastoral and ballad traditions that are

historically associated with the production of elegy, is nevertheless a singer of Songs. The element of compulsion is also strong in Berryman's elegies: 'I need to hurry this out before I forget'(156); 'I give in. I must not leave the scene of this same death | as most of me strains to.'(151). Berryman faced a compulsion writing Dream Songs that seems to complement his protracted grief for Schwartz. As noted in my introduction, his interview with Richard Kostelanetz reveals this:

> As we spoke, Berryman claimed to have abandoned Henry, but on the table next to him was yet another Dream Song, scribbled in pencil [...] 'Well,' said Berryman, 'mostly I'm through with Henry, but the minute I say that, pains course through me. I can't bear to be rid of that admirable outlet.[26]

Tennyson's compulsion to grieve does not preclude doubting his own memory, when he wonders whether the past seems so idyllic because the present is so sad:

> And is it that the haze of grief
> Makes former gladness loom so great?
> The lowness of the present state,
> That sets the past in this relief? (XXIV)

This crisis of memory occurs similarly in LXX, where he seems to lose memory of Hallam's face: 'I cannot see the features right, | When on the gloom I strive to paint | The face I know.' Typically the poem swings from doubt to affirmation, as the poet attempts to dispel his current sadness of XXIV by taking delight in his grief in XXVII, and confronting it by comparing his state to those who have not known grief or the love that preceded it; he doesn't envy the beast 'to whom a conscience never wakes', and asserts, in a famous stanza:

> I hold it true whate'er befall;
> I feel it when I sorrow most;
> 'Tis better to have loved and lost
> Than never to have loved at all.

While he certainly makes free use of certain talismanic images to knit the individual lyrics together, Tennyson does not always overload his lyrics with significance, as when he describes the two Christmases; he could have exploited these scenes for mythic resonance (Christmas as the birth of the ultimate sacrifice), but instead uses

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[26]Kostelanetz, p. 341.

the celebration to taunt himself and remind himself of his sorrow. Again he uses repetition for a specific dramatic effect, to sound like an ironic reproach, that rules 'my troubled spirit': 'Peace and goodwill, goodwill and peace, | Peace and goodwill, to all mankind.'(XXVIII) These lines would solely constitute a savage irony, but Tennyson's religious doubt is still incomplete, and the final line is prefaced with a palliative that makes the tone more bitter-sweet than ironic: 'They bring me sorrow touched with joy, | The merry merry bells of yule.'

For Berryman, writing long after the appearance of *The Waste Land*, when the death of God had, so to speak, become a poetical and philosophical assumption rather than a radical contemplation, the depiction of Jesus had arguably obtained a new found objectivity, and he expresses this in Song 234, 'The Carpenter's Son', where he talks in a code, paradoxically, of simplistic language, an attempt to reduce the life of Jesus to basics; he hints at the much-discussed misunderstanding of the religious message ('They could not take his point'), and the obfuscation of facts through changes of time which, Berryman suggests, ironically, force us to reassess the message just as he is within this Song:

> The date's in any event a matter of wrongs
> later upon him, lest we would not know him,
> medieval, on Christmas Day.

'Medieval' seems to refer to both the shifting of the calendar, and to the shifting of Christian festivals to coincide with pre-existing pagan ones, to ease the acceptance of Christianity.[27] While Tennyson's religious doubts were noteworthy (if not that uncommon) considering his position as a public Victorian poet, Berryman confronts a very different religious world in his work; he does not have to doubt an omniscient God, since the image of such an all-encompassing deity had begun to come into question long before his time. This is not to say that Tennyson's use of Christian icons and totems constitutes an unreconstructed acceptance of what has gone before. Peter Levi argues that Tennyson was not 'the most perfect conformist' as T. S. Eliot regarded him, but 'that if there is any note of strained piety, that is because as he

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[27]Fraser, *The Golden Bough*, abridged edn (London: Macmillan, 1922), p. 360.

finished *In Memoriam* he was trying to persuade his fiancée he was an orthodox Christian.'[28] I would argue that in many instances the note of piety is not strained, but also that the poem is not so pious, and when the poet's voice is swinging between doubt and faith, this was really happening to Tennyson the man. The vacillation sometimes takes place within one lyric. XXX couches his doubt in terms of the communion of the family at Christmas, using the chorus of 'we' to suggest that his faith cannot be restored when he is left to his own thoughts: '"They rest," we said, "their sleep is sweet," | And silence followed, and we wept.' While the poem concludes in joy and belief ('O Father, touch the east, and light | The light that shone when Hope was born.'), the resolution is to some extent not as important as the doubt which preceded it. That the poet doubts at all is crucial. Levi remarks that near his death, Tennyson 'sometimes felt that when he prayed God was not listening',[29] and Eliot claimed that *In Memoriam* 'is not religious because of the quality of its faith, but because of the quality of its doubt'.[30] The question of self-concern in elegy which plays a large part in discussion of *The Dream Songs* can be applied similarly to *In Memoriam*, where lines such as 'How fares it with the happy dead?(XLIV)' take on different emotional shadings when taken out of their historical context. The phrase becomes double-edged; in its apparent palliative sense, an assumption that the dead must be 'happy' in the afterlife, which makes it easier for the living to accept loss, but the other side of this is that death itself is an end to achieve happiness. The fact that the phrase is a question makes the assumption that the dead are happy (or happier than the living) a frail one; and the poet periodically must convince himself that there even is an afterlife by considering the terrible consequences of there being nothing: 'Else earth is darkness at the core.'(XXXIV) The second stanza of this canto is full of import; echoing John of Gaunt's speech in *Richard II* with 'This round of green, this orb of flame', and also referring to the apparent creative possibilities that arise when writing without specific structural intent: 'Fantastic beauty; such as lurks | In some wild Poet,

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[28]Peter Levi, *Tennyson* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 67.
[29]Levi, p. 321.
[30]T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 3rd edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 336.

when he works | Without a conscience or an aim.' This suggests that the greatest work is as intuitive as it is planned, and in echoing Shakespeare, perhaps means to illustrate this point. Yet as soon as he has suggested this he seems to dispel the human inspiration he praises, setting human reason against divine wisdom:

> Tho' truths in manhood darkly join,
> Deep-seated in our mystic frame,
> We yield all blessing to the name
> Of him that made them current coin.(XXXVI)

He argues that the truth of Christ surpasses any truth of the poet: 'loveliness of perfect deeds, | More strong than all poetic thought'(XXXVI). The paradox of this is that poetic thought has revealed this divine truth.

The growing uncertainties of the poet throughout the work seem linked to 'spectral doubt', the fear that his human belief, the 'truths in manhood' is all there is, and that the comfort of the afterlife is just an earthly comfort. He claims that although 'my nature rarely yields | To that vague fear implied in death', he cannot escape the possibility 'that I shall be thy mate no more'(XLI). This is interesting in terms of the possibilities of narrative continuum in the poem, since its religious doubt does seem to grow in stages. He also suggests the passing of time through the poem when imagining what Hallam has experienced beyond death: 'The wonders that have come to thee, | Through all the secular to-be, | But evermore a life behind'(XLI). The more Hallam's soul experiences what is beyond life, the more life he leaves in the past. In this respect, 'to-be' could be a Shakespearean joke. At this stage the poet's concerns seem to broaden the most, so that he can have lyrics such as XLV that has no real reference to Hallam's death at all, despite concluding with 'death'. This is an excellently phrased, simple lyric portraying the development of an individual sensibility:

> But as he grows he gathers much,
> And learns the use of 'I', and 'me',
> And finds 'I am not what I see,
> And other than the things I touch.'

Similarly the change of mood and standpoint in L still does not directly involve

Hallam; the refrain of 'be near me' suggests he is the object, but the object is less important than the sentiment. Paradoxically the poem seems to reject physical closeness, and asks for abstinence: 'Be near me when the sensuous frame | Is racked with pangs that conquer trust'(L). If it is Hallam that he is asking to be near, then he subsequently regrets it as he asks 'Do we indeed desire the dead | Should still be near us at our side?'(LI). The theme of haunting that passes through the poem has a dimension for Tennyson beyond purely gothic fear; he seems to suggests that to wish the dead were still with us is to work against God and fate. This in a sense underpins all the doubt that pervades *In Memoriam*: Tennyson's resolution of this doubt is that it comes out of human failings rather than universal imperfections; and this is the conclusion he attempts to reach in the Prologue which, in order of composition is more of an epilogue, and its striving for certainty betrays this. A central doubt concerns the use of language, which is emphatically human and not divine. LII continues the theme of words which work simply as a code for reality:

> I cannot love thee as I ought,
> For love reflects the thing beloved;
> My words are only words, and moved
> Upon the topmost froth of thought.

He recognizes this recurrent paradox in his art, and uses words to describe this paradox. He unifies two discrete movements in this first stanza. He cannot love Hallam since there is no object anymore to reflect his love. Separately his words 'are only words' but similarly have no external object, no signified on which to anchor themselves; the unconnected love corresponds with a disconnection between words and reality, and surmounting both movements, between words and the abstraction of love. Later he scolds himself for using verse as a catharsis, writing not about Hallam, but for himself: 'And by the measure of my grief | I leave thy greatness to be guessed.'(LXXV) Tennyson is clearly mindful of the notion that an elegy is a reflection above all of the mourner, and that the poem memorializes itself in its evidence of grief for another's loss.

In the central section of *In Memoriam*, the poems of crisis seem clustered

together, perhaps allowing for a subsequent redemption. In the meantime, the poet allows himself room for enormous pessimism, crushing the human assumption that all destruction has a positive purpose in God's plan,

> That not a worm is cloven in vain;
> That not a moth with vain desire
> Is shrivelled in a fruitless fire,
> Or but subserves another's gain. (LIV)

His grief fuels his religious doubt as he explores a topical concern about emerging evolutionary theory; his personal loss leads him into philosophical unease. In LV, Nature doesn't care for 'the single life' as long as the species survives ('careful of the type'). This concern is in direct collision with his faith, which is physically manifested: 'I falter where I firmly trod, | And falling with my weight of cares | Upon the world's great altar stairs.' He is no longer certain of God: 'and call | To what I *feel* is Lord of all | And *faintly* trust the larger hope.'(my emphasis). As his fears increase he sees that nature is not even 'careful of the type', but allows types to die all the time. It is interesting how this sense of panic expressed by a cornerstone of Victorian letters compares with the treatment of faith in the twentieth century. Berryman presents his iconoclasm with an awareness of the questionings of religion that have gone before in poetry of the twentieth century. Instead of academic critique or mythological commentary (although mythology plays a part in the Songs), Berryman gives human characteristics to his god, and subjects him to Henry's various misunderstandings and grievances: 'He yelled at me in Greek, | my God!'(48). Similarly he mocks religious institutions and practices through flawed individuals:

> God's own problem, whistled the whiskey priest.
> I cannot help him. But if he repents,
> I'll do what I can, man.

Yet it is worth noting that later in life Berryman reverted to his childhood Catholicism, while Tennyson remained doubtful to the end. As far as the poetry is concerned, *The Dream Songs* exhibits none of the religious reconciliation evident in *In Memoriam*. Haffenden notes that in 1954 Berryman was infatuated with a Catholic woman, Sally Appleton:

> In the following months he came to feel a tremendous affection for her, which she could not reciprocate. Her rectitude, and her position as a Catholic, spoke strongly to him, and her inaccessibility as an ideal in his life figured prominently during a period of radical self-assessment that he experienced later in 1954.[31]

Henry seems to take the place of the modern intellectual sceptic, bruised by fate which has made faith near impossible: 'bitter Henry, full of the death of love'(48). The sea change in mentality between Tennyson's time and Berryman's can perhaps be represented by *In Memoriam*'s struggle to retain faith, where *The Dream Songs* represents, in part, a struggle to discover it, which Berryman apparently achieved with the increasingly religious tenor of his later works, *Love & Fame*, *Delusions &c.*, and *Recovery*. Tennyson more easily reverts, after rage, to appeasement:

> Peace; come away: the song of woe
> Is after all an earthly song:
> Peace; come away: we do him wrong
> To sing so wildly, let us go.(LVIII)

As if to presage the personalization of religious thought that takes place after him, Tennyson begins to personalize the symbols of Christ; in a dream state in LXIX, the poet finds 'a wood with thorny boughs: | I took the thorns to bind my brows.' His reconciliation begins here, however, as the confusion of the dream becomes a divine mystery when an angel touches the crown:

> He reached the glory of a hand,
> That seemed to touch it into leaf:
> The voice was not the voice of grief,
> The words were hard to understand.

The inability to explain the workings of God does not result in anger or even awe, but a serene openness; the acceptance of strange behaviour in the dream state operates here on the level of the mystical vision which has and continues to empower a poetic voice, from 'The Dream of the Rood' through Henry Vaughan ('I saw eternity the other night | Like a great Ring of pure and endless light'[32]) to Yeats in the twentieth

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[31] *Life*, p. 242.
[32] Henry Vaughan, 'The World', in *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. by L. C. Martin (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 299, l. 1-2.

century. *In Memoriam* at this stage seems to be moving from a state of reason(LV) to a state of unreason, full of dream and memory. As he continues, the poet allows himself to enjoy the present, natural world (as in LXXXVI, where 'Doubt and Death' are dissolved when 'A hundred spirits whisper "Peace."'), and the past he shared with Hallam (as in LXXXVII when the poet returns to university). He continues to contemplate haunting but does not fear it, and appears to wish it: 'Descend, and touch, and enter; hear | The wish too strong for words to name; | That in this blindness of the frame | My Ghost may feel that thine is near.'(XCII) This section is part of a general reminiscence, rehearsing the significant moments in a shared life, emphasizing a sense of lyrical beauty more than philosophical or religious dilemmas. The poems still evoke sadness, and in canto C, the poet walks in a countryside that evokes memory, but without the mystical note of earlier lyrics; he merely hints at the complexity of an afterlife, when seeing each familiar scene: 'I think once more he seems to die.' The third Christmas in the poem seems to be used as a time to cleanse, perhaps punning on the repeated command to 'ring out' whatever is wrong, and 'ring in' whatever is good, 'ring' perhaps punning with 'wring'. The poem's final reconciliation almost suggests a kind of Wordsworthian pantheism, where the poet can sense Hallam's presence, not mystically imaged at the right hand of God, but infused into the physical world:

> Thy voice is on the rolling air;
> I hear thee where the waters run;
> Thou standest in the rising sun,
> And in the setting thou art fair.

The crucial congruence between Tennyson and Berryman is that despite the cultural and temporal gulf between them, they recognize the private and public catharsis of the process of both mourning and its literary counterpart, which must be explored to achieve any spiritual rapprochement. They realized that the elegy is more than anything a poem addressed to oneself, 'verse that brings myself relief' (LXXV). The elegy cannot hope to present a full picture of its dead subject, but only by presenting the grief of the poet can it work — in this sense it is very much a social poem as well as a deeply personal one. The elegy is about one who has died but it is

for those who are left behind. The poet simultaneously addresses his own soul, dealing with its loss, and society's, which was emphatically the case with *In Memoriam*. Peter Levi notes:

> The Queen was greatly moved by Alfred's new Prologue to the *Idylls*, which he published almost at once, and in the sad years that followed found serious comfort, as so many Victorians did, in *In Memoriam*.[33]

Berryman was not so obviously writing in a public sense as the Laureate Tennyson. Tennyson was still writing in an age when poetry was a medium with which the reading public was readily conversant. In the second half of the twentieth century in the United States, the role of poetry has little similarity to that of Victorian England, and Berryman was certainly not a laureate of any kind; if such a post existed it would probably have belonged to Frost. The 'isolation of modern poetry' about which Delmore Schwartz wrote gives Berryman an ironic freedom from any duty to respect his country's institutions (not that he would have anyway, however civic his fame had become).[34]

Tennyson and Berryman both represent, in certain respects, the end of an era. They are both poets delineating societies in the midst of enormous change. Tennyson represents, perhaps, a moral collision between Victorian ratiocination and Romantic subjectivity. Berryman was writing at a time of America's greatest upheaval since the Second World War, the composition of *The Dream Songs* in particular covering the period of the Vietnam war, the American civil rights movement, the Kennedy and King asssassinations and a perceived radicalization of popular culture. Both poets may be seen as partly representative of the social situations in which they found themselves, and in this sense they operate simultaneously in a personal and a public mode. Tennyson appears to take the most personal loss and to use it, sometimes naively, sometimes with great reproachfulness, to examine his most deeply held assumptions and beliefs about the universe. Berryman takes his deepest, 'irreversible loss' and uses it to drive the regurgitation of everything the universe has thrown at

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[33]Levi, p. 272.
[34]*Selected Essays of Delmore Schwartz* , ed. by Donald A. Dike and David H. Zucker (London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 7.

him since birth. So, *In Memoriam* is a search for truth, perhaps earthly contentment, attempting to transform grief into faith, whereas *The Dream Songs* absorbs universal and personal loss and responds with a complex of psychical trauma, the history of literature, schizophrenia and the corrosion of language.

Tennyson considers the finiteness of immediate feeling, which inspires poetry. 'What hope is here for modern rhyme?' is a veiled way of saying 'what hope is there that *my* verse will still be around,' many years hence, when

> A man upon a stall may find,
> And passing, turn the page that tells
> A Grief, then changed to something else,
> Sung by a long forgotten mind.

This is merely the act of literature, which transforms life into art, and inevitably changes what was real into 'something else'. The question of whether biographical or so-called Confessional poetry can be justified in its intense personal specificity, at least where Berryman is concerned, is spurious, since no work of literature can be faithful to a life while it remains merely words on a page. As Tom Stoppard has said, 'of all forms of fiction autobiography is the most gratuitous.'[35] Just as fiction can be said to intrude upon autobiography in the most fundamental sense, that of self-image, the reverse can also be true when an artist's work is seen by his critics to constitute not only what he does but what he is. The transformation of the life the poet lives into the life of his poetry is a sublimation of paramount importance in this discussion, and the intensity of the written persona may be proportional to the poet's eagerness to achieve, perversely, a greater artistic distance. What distinguishes Berryman in this respect is his use of Henry not simply to distance but to poeticize mourning with a completeness accordant with the essential aims of his work. Whereas Tennyson elegizes through repetitive, echoing spells of grief; fixed around an explicit notion of the mourning self, Berryman, through the mask of Henry, displaces even the certainty of a self in grief. He represents the loss of friends and contemporaries through the loss of a coherent poetic persona, and this is ultimately traced to his fundamental,

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[35]*The Penguin Dictionary of Modern Quotations*, ed. by J.M. and M.J. Cohen, 2nd Edn (London: Penguin, 1980), p. 320.

'irreversible' loss.

In my introduction I mentioned Berryman's intention that *The Dream Songs* should be the *Song of Myself* of its age. Of course there are discrepancies in the realization of this ambition and the underlying meaning of the expressed intention. However, Whitman's elegiac poetry, in 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd', and his unique stance as a poet of persona makes for fruitful comparisons with Berryman's work. While their style and subject matter differ greatly, such comparisons can be illuminating in defining what constitutes their respective poetics.

While Whitman's prosody may have a more apparent openness to it than Berryman's, the impression taken from passages of *Song of Myself*, for example is of a philosophical striving, an almost impressionistic accumulation of the poet's ideas. Indeed, within 'Song of Myself', he refers to the desire to arrive at a final meaning but simultaneously believes that the meaning may not be explicitly on the page, that he is transmitting a grander concept that exists between the lines. He questions the reader, 'Have you ever felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?'(2, l. 32) and then promises, 'Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems.'2, l. 33) Yet when he sets out to trace this origin, he admits that his explanation is in one sense redundant: 'To elaborate is to no avail, learn'd and unlearn'd feel that it is so.'(3, l. 48). Whitman's vision dictates that a common truth can be felt as much as understood through his testimony. In this sense there is an inherent contradiction in Whitman's loquacity and list-making. His sense of self and selfhood among a society and a nation should be intimated, yet the poem reiterates countless times the central theme of oneness, covering the same concept, modifying and amplifying through 1300 lines of verse.

Whereas Berryman tends to compress a thought almost to extinction within fragments of *The Dream Songs*, Whitman illustrates the metaphysics of a song of 'myself' with a great litany of human interaction, and interaction between his self and the natural world:

> My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the
> passing of blood and air through my lungs,

> The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and
> dark-color'd sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn,
> The sound of the belched words of my voice loos'd
> to the eddies of the wind,
> A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms,
> The play of shine and shade on the trees as the
> supple boughs wag.[36]

Whitman's subject matter moves quite naturally from one element to the next with no sense of disruption; everything is swept along in the unfettered cadence of his distinctive metre. Gay Wilson Allen cites Emerson's essay 'The Poet' to justify what was, at the time, a revolutionary style of poetry: 'it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem,— a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing.'[37] While Berryman adheres almost exclusively in *The Dream Songs* to an iambic structure based on three stanzas of the form 5-5-3, his particular use of emphasis produces an often startlingly unrhythmical effect, and while Whitman's verse allows for a balanced if not traditionally metred rhythm which flows from image to image, Berryman often creates a deliberately harsh disruption in his poems through a radical shifting of subject and style, disruptive syntax and jagged phrasing; at the same time, this does not rob the poems of their unity, and can make the briefest phrases more intense in their isolation:

> I stalk my mirror down this corridor
> my pieces litter. Oklahoma, sore
> from my great loss leaves me.
> We pool our knowless in my seminar,
> question all comers that they may not jar
> their intrepidity. (195)

Berryman constructs one stanza from two discrete images, but by shrouding both in a tangle of strange diction, marked out only by the identical grammar of the first and fourth lines, he forces the two parts to comment on each other. The nightmarish image of the poet stalking his own image 'down this corridor' introduces a sense of the schizophrenic muddling of persona that distinguishes the Songs, and is emphasized

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[36]Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself', II, l. 23-27 in *Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 1975), p. 64.
[37]R. W. Emerson, 'The Poet' (1844), cited in Gay Wilson Allen, *A Reader's Guide to Walt Whitman* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1970), p. 157.

here by 'my pieces litter'; the pieces might refer to his poems or more centrally the fragments of the poet as presented therein. The autobiographical reference to Oklahoma, the place of Berryman's birth, suggests a severing of the comforting ties of infancy — Oklahoma, personified enough to feel the pain of the poet's 'great loss', leaves him, he does not leave it. This uncertainty is paralleled in the second part of the stanza in that 'We' are 'knowless'. While there appears to be an academic setting, given by 'my seminar', the attachment of this scene to the deeply personal vision that precedes it provides a deeper resonance, the 'We' of the seminar corresponding with the schizophrenic 'pieces' in the first part. Whereas Whitman combines disparate subject matter in a way that seems suited in the context of a vision of such scope and inclusiveness as his, Berryman yokes together jarring images to create an effect of initial confusion, then mutual illumination.

While Berryman moves schizophrenically between internal images, significant memories which punctuate his present concerns, Whitman moves through an external world like a transient, unseen spirit, gliding from place to place, as in part 8 of 'Song of Myself':

> The little one sleeps in its cradle,
> I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silently brush
> away flies with my hand.
>
> The youngster and the red faced girl turn aside up the bushy
> hill,
> I peeringly view them from the top.
> The suicide sprawls on the bloody floor of the bedroom,
> I witness the corpse with its dabbled hair, I note where
> the pistol has fallen.

Whitman presents various personae without obvious dramatic intent; instead he seems to emphasize multiplicity; in the above passage he is first nurse, then spy, then coroner. The ostensible purpose of this transience is perhaps to encompass the diversity of his nation, as the poet spends time with 'the boatmen and the clam diggers', the trapper and his native American wife, and the runaway slave. Berryman assumes the role of the internal speaking character rather than taking the stance of external observer of character. He becomes his characters sometimes as much as he

identifies with them. Song 40 typifies this protean assimilation of persona:

> Wishin was dyin but I gotta make
> it all this way to that bed on these feet
> where peoples said to meet.
> Maybe but even if I see my son
> forever never, get back on the take,
> free, black & forty-one.

While Whitman takes the runaway slave into his home, Berryman becomes the runaway slave. Beyond this characterization, the difference between the poets is perhaps that Whitman stresses external contact with his fellow man and with nature, but Berryman uses the image of his fellow man to contact himself. He often employs Henry as a ghostly third party, a kind of poetic proxy, who speaks from outside even the initial speaker's voice, allowing for a dramatic distance and a sense of scene or situation, as in Song 124:

> Behold I bring you tidings of great joy—
> especially now that the snow & gale are still—
> for Henry is delivered.

Henry here is presented as a persona distinct from the 'I' bringing the tidings. The complication of extra voices is not a gratuity of structure but complements the subject of the Song, the birth of Henry's son, which the multiplied pronouns complement by illustrating textually the duplication of Henry by his son, the generation of another Henry. Henry's participation in the process is posited as physical in the reference to 'Couvade' — the empathetic experience of labour by an expectant father. The essential action or thought of the poem, however, is still Henry's, allowing the poet to stand outside his work in a way that contrasts with Whitman's constant explicit involvement, if not as player then as spectator. Whitman the poet is always present, observing the actions of others, or the actions of Whitman the man. Berryman attempts to abdicate such presence, in favour of a more devious, tricky poetics.

Berryman is a far more difficult presence to pin down in his poetry. The use of Henry is a central confusion. Out of 385 Songs, 87 do not contain any reference to Henry, yet many of these, through their use of language and subject matter, imply Henry's presence without announcing it. Moreover the purpose of Henry changes

throughout the work. Towards the end of *The Dream Songs*, the use of dialogue between Henry as Mr. Bones and his unnamed friend disappears, and instead Henry becomes a sort of all-purpose character in the third person to whom events happen. The second half of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* has come under critical attack by some for this alleged descent into coy and easily denied autobiography. Robert Hahn caustically remarks that 'the pictures of Henry [in later Dream Songs] superimpose themselves on, becoming identical with, a self-pitying and self-aggrandising man.'[38] Hahn and others argue that Henry becomes no longer a mediator and more of a mask. I would suggest that what is lacking from some of the later Songs is not a more rounded vision of Henry, but any interaction with other characters. In the later Songs, Henry is usually alone, but more importantly is existing in an easily recognizable world, rather than the unsettling limbo in which the 'Bones' dialogues take place. The Irish setting of the later Songs is part of this tethering of the poems to a more concrete reality. They give the poem the nearest thing to narrative structure, a diary-like order, but they are without some of the disturbance of the earlier poems. Where Whitman makes a positive use of physical scene, Berryman's work is often limited by them; his evocation of scene and physical detail is confined to fleeting glimpses, which are suggestive of a gasp for fresh air outside the stifling atmosphere of Henry's thoughts. The stark simplicity of Song 191 illustrates how brief these moments are: 'The autumn breeze was light & bright. A small bird | flew in the back door & the beagle got it.' This unadorned picture brings us instantly back to Henry's *raison d'être*, a grim meditation on death: 'My wife kills flies & feeds them to the dog, [...] | This is a house of death.' Elsewhere a whole Song is devoted to a particular scene — the most memorable of these take place outside America, such as Song 24 ('The mad sun rose through on the ghats | & the saddhu in maha mudra, the great River') or Song 102 ('The sunburnt terraces which swans make home | with water purling, Macchu Pichu died | like Delphi long ago'). These scenes are strangely reminiscent of Conrad in their exotic setting and the tone of underlying malaise. More importantly, these Songs

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[38]Robert Hahn, 'Berryman's *Dream Songs:* Missing Poet Beyond the Poet', *Massachusetts Review*, 23 (1982), 117-128 (p. 118).

which have a stronger sense of scene have a weaker sense of Henry. This is not so surprising since it follows that as he looks at the outside world we will see less of the viewer in his work.

When one surveys the Songs as a whole it is interesting to note how little external detail can be found, and when it can, the poet does not seem part of it, rather an other-worldly observer; in Song 62 he observes a rabbit that, like Lowell's skunks, does not encourage any Whitmanesque 'yawp' but excites his curiosity by its sheer indifference to humanity. 'The rabbit was a fraud' he writes, as if upset that he feels no sense of natural communion in the presence of this animal; he implies surprise and disappointment at its casual behaviour: 'Then he went mildly by, [...] | and when I followed there he just sat. | Only at last | he turned around, passing my wife at four feet.' It is notable that Berryman seems ironically to use the language of Whitman, such as 'with prickt ears, while rapt but chatting on the porch | we sat in view nearby.' In 'Song of Myself', the poet is by contrast drawn towards nature without precondition:

> The sharp hoof'd moose of the north, the cat on the house-sill,
> the chickadee, the prairie dog,
> The litter of the grunting sow as they tug at her teats,
> The brood of the turkey-hen and she with her half-spread wings,
> I see in them and myself the same old law. (14, l. 249-252)

Whitman expresses an unquestionable familial bond with both humanity and with nature; but while Henry finds kinship with fellow poets, this is often an extinguished friendship, when he is memorializing a dead friend. In that sense, the friendship is purely a literary fiction, as Henry is a literary creation, and his elegies are imaginary dialogues with the dead, which correspond with the more frequent dialogues with himself. Nevertheless, dialogue presents Berryman's strongest evocation of scene, albeit a completely abstract one. His pictures of the world, both America and more exotic scenes, do not have Whitman's empathy with his surroundings; rather he views the world from a sceptical distance. One might conclude that Whitman's background for *Leaves of Grass* is America itself, while Berryman's background is his own life and mind; Whitman's scene is geographical, Berryman's is psychological.

Whitman's elegy, 'When Lilacs Last In the Dooryard Bloom'd' and the other poems in *Memories of President Lincoln* exemplify his careful use of familiar natural scenes but with a peculiar symbolic effect. Indeed Gay Wilson Allen notes that 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd' 'makes extensive use of the pastoral motifs and symbolical nature images of the elegiac tradition from Virgil to Tennyson', but that Whitman's use of such popular elegy images as the falling star, the perfumed lilac, the rebirth of spring and the singing bird is completely appropriate, and is executed with subtlety and a rich, sorrowful music.[39] While adhering to many traditions of elegy, Whitman displays all the techniques found elsewhere in *Leaves of Grass* but dedicates his style to a more coherent thematic and symbolic unity. The repetitive list-making that characterizes *Leaves of Grass* is here used more judiciously to create a specific scene as with the depiction of the 'Coffin that passes through lanes and streets.' In addition he uses repetition both to draw together the various elements of the poem and to represent the cyclical nature of mourning. The death-symbols he uses, as well as drawing on classical precedents, are used quite naturally as associative elements of the poet's mourning: 'Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west, | And thought of him I love.' The lilac, the star and the coming of spring (Lincoln was murdered at Easter) remind the poet at every instance of the funeral he follows. The continuance of his grief ('I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring') matches the continuance of the central images through the poem.

The elegies by Berryman for Delmore Schwartz (whose importance shall be discussed further in Chapter Four) initially seem as dissimilar as they could be from 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd', and certainly the tone of a number of the ten Songs demonstrate the particular change of tone in the elegy that Berryman represents; however, on closer examination a number of elements are as archetypal as those so well used by Whitman, and perhaps will never be excised from elegy. Despite the vaguely urban setting of Berryman's Schwartz elegies, he still echoes Whitman's use of birdsong, and of course the title of Berryman's work provides

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[39]Gay Wilson Allen, *A Reader's Guide To Walt Whitman* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1970), p.157.

obvious resonances. Song 147 employs a musical refrain, 'Delmore, Delmore', reminiscent of Whitman's repetition of salient phrases and images; in Berryman's poem, however, the singing is not confined to the thrush, but is shared between men. Henry sings the refrain 'Delmore, Delmore', but in the third stanza the poet describes Schwartz's verse in the guise of birdsong: 'High in the summer branches the poet sang. | His throat ached, and he could sing no more.' This line echoes closely Part Four of 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd', where the bird's song is the 'Song of the bleeding throat'. As I have already noted, Lea Baechler regards the above lines as pastorally derived, and while both poems share common sources, Berryman could not have been unaware of this similarity, and was perhaps attempting to create a subliminal image of Schwartz as the carolling bird, as Whitman describes it, 'The hermit withdrawn to himself.'[40] The carol of the bird in 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd' is characterized by its passionate embrace of death ('praise! praise! praise! | For the sure enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death!'). But the acuteness of grief displayed by Berryman seems far from the loving acceptance of death expressed by Whitman, who is in complete accord with the bird's song: 'And the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird.' Significantly the poet in Song 147 sings only for a short time, until 'his throat ached, and he could sing no more'. This may refer not only to Schwartz's death but also his creative decline, recognized and admitted freely by Berryman: 'His work downhill I don't conceal from you' (157). While Whitman's elegy is full of unqualified admiration for Lincoln, Berryman does not flinch from announcing the shortcomings of the dead poet he praises. This is not just the case with Schwartz but with many of the subjects of his elegies. Berryman's elegies are distinguished by their primarily ambivalent tone, the willingness to discuss the dead for whom he grieves with a candour which might seem indecent other than in the context of his poetics. One does not need to be aware of Berryman's personal history to appreciate that his disruptive style and the often iconoclastic vigour of *The Dream Songs* is well capable of accommodating the abrasive and aggressive tones of

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[40]Baechler, p. 134.

this kind of elegy, which is not without lyrical beauty but places it amid a mordant and uneasy confrontation with death, as the opening of Song 88 illustrates in its picture of Henry as an artistic scavenger, preying on death as a source of inspiration: 'In slack times visit I the violent dead | and pick their awful brains.' In one sense it is this harshness and sense of the macabre that makes more traditionally lyrical passages seem more passionate and fitting, such as the honourable memory of Schwartz in Song 155: 'I remember his electrical insight as the young man, | his wit & passion, gift, the whole young man | alive with surplus love.'

It should perhaps be noted that Whitman and Berryman have very different subjects to contend with for their elegies, and their respective reactions to the deaths of Lincoln and Schwartz must inevitably have affected the style of their poetry, as did the nature of their deaths; while Lincoln's was national tragedy, Schwartz's was private sordidness. Whitman however does not dwell greatly on the assassination of Lincoln, and the only forceful expression of angry grief comes in Part Two: 'O great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides the star! | O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me!' What partly characterizes Whitman's elegy is its restraint. Conversely, Berryman expresses intense fear and anger in the face of death. He is haunted by the dead in Song 146, 'in their limp postures,' and especially the 'new ghost', Schwartz, 'the Hebrew spectre, on a note of woe | and Join me O.' He is angry and distressed at the nature of Schwartz's death:

> I need to hurry this out before I forget
> which I will never He fell on the floor
> Outside a cheap hotel-room
> my tearducts are worn out, the ambulance came
> and there on the way he died.

He repeats these circumstances a number of times as if he cannot believe that such a person to be respected as Schwartz could die 'miserably & alone'(149). So while Whitman passes over Lincoln's murder to concentrate on the meaning of his death and of death itself, Berryman cannot help but go over the ignominious death of his friend, and giving greater scope to the presentation of instances in his life which illustrate both his initial greatness and his sad descent into paranoia and isolation. In

Song 155 he describes a scene illustrative of Schwartz's mental decline:

> He drove up to my house in Providence
> ho ho at 8 a.m. in a Cambridge taxi
> and told it to wait.
>
> He walked my living room, & did not want breakfast
> or even coffee, or even a drink [...]
> we never learnt why he came, or what he wanted.

Whitman presents no such image of Lincoln; his elegy is concerned with presenting mourning through metaphoric and metonymic (in the case of the coffin) images through which we can gauge the significance of his death. Berryman instead gives the reader a series of vivid pictures of his subject, not all of them flattering or decorous, and also presents the image of the poet in the midst of grief which is not governed by the same kind of lyrical grace found in Whitman's verse. Berryman employs a range of registers to replicate the gamut of emotions experienced in bereavement. He expresses an undisguised sense of devastation and desperate anger at the loneliness of Schwartz's death: 'Sick & heartbroken Henry sank to his knees | Delmore is dead. His good body lay unclaimed | three days.'(151) He simulates the recurrent stages of grief, as he appears to close his remembrance in Song 152 ('I bid you then a raggeder farewell | than at any time my grief would have desired'), but in Song 155 admits that 'I can't get him out of my mind, out of my mind'.

Berryman and Whitman's respective sense of elegiac tone appears to correspond very closely with their respective projections of self. For any poet this correspondence is inevitable, since the death of another leaves the poet only himself with whom to react; he can observe his subject only in the confines of his memory. Whitman's poetry is as concerned with observation as it is with memory and philosophy, and in 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd', he substitutes his absent subject for others of deep metaphoric and traditional significance to sustain the observational faculty which is so central to his poetry. Berryman, on the other hand, is an elegist preoccupied more with fantasy, and mental more than physical observation. The absence of an external subject is precisely what drives his poetry on. With the death of a fellow poet, he is given the freedom to mine his own memory and to delve,

perhaps recklessly, into his own psyche, emerging with barely controllable images and thoughts. In Song 159, after mourning the loss of Schwartz, Henry considers whether his life is also meant to end, but pulls away from death since he believes that 'there are secrets, secrets, I may yet— | hidden in history & theology, hidden in rhyme— | come on to understand.' For the time being, his thirst for knowledge overrides his affinity with death. While Whitman appears to have accomplished a controlled and seemingly contented philosophy of death, which he articulates with lyrical grandeur, Berryman manufactures a poetry of indecision, a Hamlet-like anxiety based on opposing and constantly conflicting impulses which propel *The Dream Songs* through repeated losses and crises with unease but with an original and progressive expression.

In the twentieth century elegy tends inevitably to reflect the changes of the age, and this is manifested in divesting it of pastoral ornament, moving from allegory and euphemism to metaphors of psychological trauma, or else imitative obituary, which is often the case with the elegies of Auden. The transformation in poetic theory and in the language of poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century is mirrored to an extent in his memorials to celebrated figures recently dead, as Beach notes of Auden's treatment of Housman in his dedicatory poem:

> This poem begins ostensibly as an apology for Housman and what he was, under the guise of explaining how he got that way [...] But the irony is evident from the start [...] The poem is a double-barreled attack on a poet of an earlier school, who was, as Auden says, 'the leading classic of his generation.' [...] But the animus was more against Cambridge than against Housman's style of writing [...] But, Auden writes here, not even Cambridge was to blame for the crusted scholastic pedantry that characterized the Cambridge don and author of *A Shropshire Lad*.[41]

While the particular axe that Beach seems to have ground in his study may have led him to consider Auden's revisionism to constitute a 'double-barreled attack', there is an undeniable note of ambivalence in the poem itself; however this is an ambivalence not necessarily equable with the neurotic distrust I am arguing for in the work of Berryman. The poem is in a most recognizable Auden style; the tone never rises

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[41]Joseph Warren Beach, *The Making of the Auden Canon* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957), p. 268.

above the coolly ironic, seamlessly marrying traditional iambs with conversational opacity; thoroughly colloquial yet almost passionless. Auden's elegiac poetry is public in its decorum, concealing its griefs and mirroring immaculately its subject in this endeavour; in this instance Auden notes Housman's academic dryness and his attempts at a more aggressive articulation with a dryness of his own which in turn contrasts with personal mockery: 'In savage footnotes on unjust editions | He timidly attacked the life he led.' Auden's ambivalence is manifested here not in Oedipal unrest but in restrained sarcasm. Where Berryman lets out a menagerie of psychic malcontents, Auden keeps his ambivalence at a social and literary level, scorning Housman's empathy, when he 'put the money of his feelings on | the uncritical relations of the dead'. In a sense Auden might be considered to have left behind the essence of elegy in the disappearance of explicit grief, and its replacement with an assessment of the life lost, phrased with apparent distance and reserve. That this distance may be only apparent allows for some critical assessments which have assumed Auden's stance to be disguise. Indeed, other of Auden's elegies are perhaps less cold than 'A. E. Housman'. David Shaw suggests that in 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats' Auden communicates a great deal of his attitude towards the dead through what he omits, exemplified in the first stanza:

> He disappeared in the dead of winter:
> The brooks were frozen, the air-ports almost deserted,
> And snow disfigured the public statues;
> The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.
> O all the instruments agree
> The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Shaw writes:

> Like Hopkins, Auden allows some of his elegies to alternate between a clipped, oracular style, where death is confronted in what is elided or displaced, and a more expansive language. Sometimes, in his elegy for Yeats, the two styles come together, often in the same line. Though the obituary plainness of the January scene seems capable of endless elaboration, it is conveyed with a disturbing economy of words and gestures. [...] The weather report is straightforward, but its laconic simplicity allows elided meanings to filter through. We hear them in the euphemism of the opening verb, 'He disappeared', in the telegraphic style that leaves more implied than it says, and in the stanza's single metaphor, which turns the death of the day into the death

of a patient.[42]

I would suggest that Auden is not necessarily dealing in elided meaning, but meaning at one or more removes; in his use of such emotional distancing Auden describes objectively the elegiac process that Berryman seeks to enact from within, the transformation of the artist into his art at the point of death: 'By mourning tongues | the death of the poet was kept from his poems. | [...]The words of a dead man | Are modified in the guts of the living.'[43] While Auden sees the issue of this modification with misgiving, Berryman goes further by reforming the process in the first person while collapsing subject and object relations as a microcosm of the empathy to which Auden refers from an external point of view. Berryman reveals the act of modifying the dead's words not in his guts but in his words, which are themselves bound towards the same modification. Berryman's distancing of personal voice is countered by the intense, overbalancing identification of that voice with its object. Ramazani discusses Auden's elegy mode as involving 'identification', but I feel this is of an essentially textual nature, involving as Ramazani says 'appreciative imitation'.[44] This is also the case with 'In Memory of Sigmund Freud', which as Ramazani rightly points out, psychoanalyses the father of psychoanalysis.[45] Yet this observation tends to discount what Ramazani has to say about Auden's identification, since Auden does not take on the construct of psychoanalysis from within his voice but from a critical stance. His ambivalence is expressed in a tone of public remembrance, undercutting panegyric with a belittling emphasis on the ordinariness of Freud's discoveries. Auden comments on the very commonness of modern elegy to which his own poem is subject:

> When there are so many we shall have to mourn,
> When grief has been made so public, and exposed
> To the critique of a whole epoch
> The frailty of our conscience and anguish,

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[42]David W. Shaw, *Elegy and Paradox* (London, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1994), p. 134.
[43]W. H. Auden, 'In Memory of W. B Yeats', in *Selected Poems*, ed by Edward Mendelsohn (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), p. 81.
[44]Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 177.
[45]ibid.

Of whom shall we speak?

While taking for granted that Freud changed the world, Auden says that 'He wasn't clever at all'. Furthermore he implies Freud's subjection to his own discoveries, 'something of the autocratic pose.' Auden's identification stops short of the congruence of text and idea that Berryman displays in his elegies. Whereas Berryman displays the internal effect of grief in the essence of his work, Auden achieves an effect of imitative distance, not turning his own voice into a mourning facsimile of Freud's, or expressing the stages of grief in the language of his verse, but only resembling Freud in placing himself outside the neuroses he observed in his patients with a cool, clinical diction, and implicating Freud in susceptibility to neurosis. As with the elegy to Yeats, Auden's emphasis is on the textualization of the artist in his death, a process from which he exempts himself: 'To us he is no more a person | now but a whole climate of opinion.' Stan Smith notes, with reference to the elegy for Yeats, this process described by Auden but not entered into as persona:

> As an 'unconstraining voice', the father becomes the child of his own children, for 'The death of the poet [is] kept from his poems'; he becomes, that is, merely an effect of the text. Language had moved from an original fullness of meaning to scattered rumours and then to silence [...] In the end, even his personal death is taken up into discourse.

Where Berryman diverges from this mode of remembrance, which is in itself a radical departure from the modes of nineteenth century elegy, is that he has already created a version of himself, Henry, as an 'effect of the text', and gives textual shape to the very sublimation of personality into word that Auden sees happening to Yeats and Freud. But Auden does not rescind the authority of his voice in unveiling this truth. Berryman, however, acknowledges the paradox of the author remaining concrete and distinct from this process, which is after all a paradigm of literary history, and makes it turn in on itself by turning the mourner into text as well as the mourned.

As with 'Lycidas', *Adonais*, *In Memoriam* and 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd', Berryman articulates in his elegies a literary facsimile of the process of mourning, the sudden changes of tone and content, the irrationality and

seemingly disturbed logic of many Songs echoing the changing moods and the irrationality of mourning. Where modern elegies, and Berryman's in particular, differ, is in the seeming absence of consolation. Pigman says of 'Lycidas' that it indeed has sudden changes of tone and voice, and expresses anger and doubt, and these are not nullified by its consolation. At the same time the consolation itself is unequivocal:

> 'Lycidas' is full of angry protests, but not against being left alone by the death of a dear friend [...] 'Lycidas' angrily challenges God's ordering of the world and ruthlessly exposes the insufficiency of pagan pastoral to offer adequate consolation for death. Yet despite repeated revisionary, defiant gestures, the poem does not wholly reject pastoral and does not turn against its earlier expressions of sorrow and indignation. The vision of Lycidas in the company of the saints is the gentlest, most sympathetic consolation in Renaissance England. More than any other the vision respects the painful doubts and feelings it is intended to assuage.[46]

Berryman offers no consolation, only distress; his vision is suited to twentieth-century definitions of the unresolved mourner, in that the questions and doubts voiced by elegists before him remain unanswered and unanswerable in *The Dream Songs*, and yet the questions continue. While 'Lycidas' also involves some shifting of persona, between shepherd and poet, mourner and mourned, Berryman works out his mourning personae with a modern psychological slant, prefiguring its god as another object of emotional ambivalence (the ramifications of which shall be explored in Chapter Four), laying emphasis instead on the struggles of ego. In *Mourning and Melancholia* Freud identifies the turning-inward of emotion that loss engenders, and in Chapter Four I shall highlight the relevance of this to Henry; suffice to say here that Henry's multiplicitous perspective constitutes an enactment of Freud's exploration of mourning. While Auden obliquely mourns the loss of Freud as a 'climate of opinion', Henry's existence as a character in perpetual dialogue and confrontation with himself, especially in the 'Bones' dialogues with his anonymous, rationalizing friend, can be seen as a paradigm of the internal conflicts Freud describes. In this view, Berryman's creation of Henry epitomizes and represents the elegiac in the essence of his character. He is not merely a figure given to mourning, but the presentation of his persona is an ongoing articulation of the elegiac impulse.

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[46]G. W. Pigman, *Grief and English Renaissance Elegy* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 110.

Chapter Two
The Elegiac in the Work of Berryman's Contemporaries

While Berryman was clearly writing with a broad elegiac tradition in mind, his distinctiveness as an elegist may be usefully determined also by examining the trends towards elegy on the part of his closest contemporaries, notably Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, Randall Jarrell and Delmore Schwartz, who also happened to become subjects for a number of *The Dream Songs*' specific elegies. Berryman's work is most explicitly emblematic of a change in the production of elegiac poetry in this era which was partly caused, I believe, by the remarkable death toll among its authors. The irony of elegists who die, with such frequency and in such tragic circumstances, leads the reader of poetry to question the motives of writing so possessed by the fact of death; but perhaps this is the wrong approach to the question. What might be deduced from such a complex problem of mortality is that the writing of elegy is inextricably linked, in the case of the aforementioned poets, with the urge towards self-destruction. There are numerous echoes in their work which collectively suggest that they felt theirs to be a lost generation, doomed to remain barely recognized in posterity. Lowell's poem 'For John Berryman' displays this well:

> Yet really we had the same life,
> the generic one
> our generation offered
> (*Les Maudits* —the compliment
> each American generation
> pays itself in passing)...
> our fifties' fellowships
> to Paris, Rome and Florence,
> veterans of the Cold War not the War.[1]

The fear expressed above that their generation was simply not momentous enough to allow their fame to persist, that it offered them a 'generic life', is perhaps worth noting when considering the major concerns in their poetry, which spring from the

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[1] Robert Lowell, *Day by Day* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1977), p. 27.

consequences of death, in its senses of spiritual and artistic immortality, its organic realities, the burden of heredity, the casualness of its tragedy. The elegiac and other poetry of this group is also notable for the intensity of its self-examination. Very often their elegies are personal reminiscences of incidents in the life of the person mourned, which tend to operate in the context of intimate memory rather than funerary memorial. Berryman is significant among this group in that he wrote more than any other about his contemporaries, all of whom (except Lowell) died before him. Not only does Berryman remember incidents in the life that has been shared with him, but he articulates his own difficulty in dealing with loss. The recurrent sense of the loss of his father is compounded by the recurrent loss of friends and fellow writers. For Berryman the elegy is not simply an act of praise of another soul, but an examination of his own, in those recesses where an image of the other exists. He does not directly celebrate the mind of a dead colleague or friend, but roots out the reflections of that other mind in his own. He does not write about Schwartz, for instance, in an abstractly reverent mode, but in terms of what Schwartz did that affected him directly. In Song 155 he simply describes an incident where '[h]e walked into my living room, & did not want breakfast', and in Song 151 the poet is 'Bitter and bleary over Delmore's dying.'

Moreover I believe that Berryman's visions of others dead are in part a satisfaction of his own fascination with death and the problems it simultaneously solves and raises. He revels in his own mortality by remarking on his similarity to his dead friends, a crucial congruence with Freud's notion of identification. The propensity for self doubt and self-examination is most clearly amenable to a psychological approach in Berryman's work, but can also be seen to an extent in the elegies and reminiscences made by his contemporaries. The elegies of this generation are portraits of a moment of psychological disturbance; they are self-portraits in the sense that memory of others also consists of memory of oneself in a given situation that involves another. These elegies are crystallizations of an event of unexplained or implicit significance, epiphanies of private memory occasioned by loss.

It would be wrong to attempt any conflation of poetic motives on the part of each member of this group, but it may be worth examining how they deal with essentially the same subject with such variety, so that Berryman's and Lowell's elegies, for instance, could never be confused even if their respective styles had differed less. Where Berryman is often concerned with death as a measure of his own fate, his own ambivalence, or his own fame, Lowell's work is preoccupied with legacy, appraising the value of his generation by reworking family history and childhood memories. Yet both poets project a vision of self in their work, Berryman through an interpolation of personified grief, Lowell largely through reminiscence.

Roethke's elegiac works bear useful comparison with his most famous poetry, in *The Lost Son*, which is noted for its graphic, enlightening recollections of the poet's exploration of his father's greenhouse. The metaphoric nature of these memories, emblematic of a deeper psychological unearthing of the poet's past, is balanced with the more direct, human remembrance of those poems such as 'My Papa's Waltz' and 'Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt and Frau Schwartze,' which operate as tremendously insightful self-portraits by way of their vividness and their elaborate isolation of the poet's memory. These memories are so specific as to imply to the reader that they represent something of far greater moment than what they ostensibly describe. In 'My Papa's Waltz', the poet sheds light on his father's persona simply through a glimpse of his own childhood, apparently stripped of any attempt at reinterpretation:

> You beat time on my head
> With a palm caked hard by dirt,
> Then waltzed me off to bed
> Still clinging to your shirt.[2]

The poem is importantly a picture of childhood as much as a recollection of the poet's father; we are given clues to the father's personality through the poet's mention of his 'battered' knuckles, his 'palm caked hard by dirt,' images which may make an important connection in the reader's mind with the other *Lost Son* poems that describe the poet's 'organic' play in his father's place of work — the garden. The visceral

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[2] Theodore Roethke, *Collected Poems* (New York: Doubleday, 1966; London: Faber & Faber,1968), p.43.

approach of those poems is complemented here by the implicit affection of the poet's memory of his father waltzing him around the kitchen. The poet writes of this evidently warm memory with a light touch that avoids excessive sentiment, yet fails to hide a slightly judgmental tone in remembering his mother's disapproval at the dance in her kitchen: 'My mother's countenance | Could not unfrown itself.' The implication here is that the countenance is a permanent one and not just a reaction to the dance, and further that there is a profound emotional interaction that the scene merely hints at. 'Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt and Frau Schwartze' is something of a marriage of the two styles, full of both strong natural observation and affectionate portraiture. The three women, pictured diligently working in the poet's father's garden, are seen almost as earthly angels, performing small miracles in the soil: 'With a tendril for a needle | They sewed up the air with a stem; | They teased out the seed that the cold kept asleep[...].' The poet reminds the reader a number of times of the women's selflessness, describing them as 'nurses of nobody else,' punning cleverly on their horticultural machinations, in that 'they plotted for more than themselves.' As in 'My Papa's Waltz,' Roethke recalls himself as a child, enhancing the reader's perception of his subjects:

> I remember how they picked me up, a spindly kid,
> Pinching and poking my thin ribs
> Till I lay in their laps, laughing,
> Weak as a whiffet[...].

In this poem, however, he goes further in implying a sense of loss which was all but absent in 'My Papa's Waltz':

> Now, when I'm alone and cold in my bed,
> They still hover over me,
> These ancient leathery crones,
> With their bandanas stiffened with sweat,
> And their thorn bitten wrists,
> And their snuff-laden breath blowing lightly over me in my
> first sleep.

In neither of these poems does Roethke write anything like 'I miss this person', yet he manages to voice his feeling of loss more subtly by remembering himself '[S]till clinging to your shirt' and lying 'alone and cold in my bed.' This restrained approach

produces a subtlety in the elegiac that nevertheless corresponds to Berryman's in its anchoring within a poetic psyche.

In 'Elegy for Jane' the poet shows restraint of a different kind, occasioned perhaps by the difference of his subject — one of his students — from his father or the women who worked in the garden.

> I remember the neckcurls, limp and damp as tendrils:
> And her quick look, a sidelong pickerel smile;
> And how, once startled into talk, the light syllables leaped for her [...]
> Oh, when she was sad, she cast herself down into such a pure depth,
> Even a father could not find her [...]
> If only I could nudge you from this sleep,
> My maimed darling, my skittery pigeon.
> Over this damp grave I speak the words of my love:
> I, with no rights in this matter,
> Neither father nor lover.

The poem does not recall an episode from the poet's childhood, and the recollection does not reflect upon the author directly until the last stanza, where the poet wishes that '[I]f only I could nudge you from this sleep'. From his choice of language it seems that the poet is struggling to distance himself from his own infatuation. After referring to 'My sparrow' and '[M]y maimed darling, my skittery pigeon,' the poet reminds himself that he has 'no rights in this matter,' that Jane was his student and not his lover. The poet's aforementioned restraint is double-edged in the sense that he clearly had a great affection for his student but doesn't wish this to appear in any way improper; at the same time he shows restraint by not explicitly analysing his own sadness but describing his subject in an elaborate yet charming quasi-pastoral mode.

In *Words for the Wind*, Roethke includes a poem for his late 'Aunt Tilly' called simply 'Elegy,' which is stylistically more explicit than the other pieces to which I have referred, but which still retains some features characteristic of Roethke's treatment of death in his work. There is less close attention to physical detail, more discursive assessment of personality:

> For she asked no quarter and gave none,
> Who sat with the dead when the relatives left,
> Who fed and tended the infirm, the mad, the epileptic,
> And, with a harsh laugh at herself,
> Faced up to the worst.

Where earlier Roethke would have teased out a picture of his subject by indirect, sometimes synecdochical means, here he presents Aunt Tilly plainly and largely unequivocally. The poem still offers some analogous details of its subject, but these elements of the poem are more prosaic, less elusive than in the earlier work:

> I recall how she harried the children away all the late summer
> From the one beautiful thing in her yard, the peachtree;
> How she kept the wizened, the fallen, the misshapen for
> herself,
> And picked and pickled the best, to be left on rickety
> doorsteps.

Such a passage, opening simply 'I recall' seems to lack the overt lyricism of 'Gone the three ancient ladies | Who creaked on the greenhouse ladders'. The latter, in its unusual construction, seems more enticing to the casual reader than the more linear style of 'Elegy,' which, while moving towards the earlier flights of fantasy in parts, (notably the closing stanza, which envisions Aunt Tilly in 'some celestial supermarket, | Moving serenely among the leeks and cabbages') is generally less inclined towards the sublime in its language and approach to its subject. This seems to highlight a factor common to the Middle Generation poets, despite their differing styles; that is, once they have found their *metier*, it seems that to depart from this definitive style is detrimental to their intentions. Berryman's work after *The Dream Songs* is seemingly deadened by its attempt to lose the 'Henry' idiom and produce a cooler, less manic voice; similarly Roethke appears ironically to suffer from the virtuosity of his earlier work.

For Randall Jarrell it was important to set out for himself and his audience the difference between poetry and prose, and how the two complement each other, as some form of preparation for his own idiom:

> Prose helps; it helps just by being prose. In the old days, when readers could take or leave prose, poets sometimes gave them a good deal of it: there are hundreds of pages of notes and prefaces and reminiscences in Wordsworth's or Tennyson's *Collected Poems*. But nowadays, unless you're reading Marianne Moore or Empson or *The Waste Land*, you rarely get any prose to go along with the poems.

Jarrell's confrontation with death was of the most brutal kind, that of World War

Two, and his poetry about his experiences in the U.S. Air Force is, while not specifically elegiac, as mournful as war poetry tends to be. The most famous of Jarrell's war poems, 'The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,' achieves a great deal in its five lines.

> From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
> And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
> Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
> I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
> When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

It is the brief song of an unidentified gunner, which mingles a notion of the state with the gunner's shelter in the 'mother's' belly — the ball turret of a B-17 bomber. The gunner is foetal, animal in a sympathetic way, 'hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze'[3] — the fur being that on his flying jacket, but evoking a sheltering mammal. The state that the gunner falls into is not the protection or even the anonymity of society, but a state of chaos. The 'dream of life,' perhaps echoing Hamlet, perhaps Shelley (*Adonais*, XXXIX), becomes a nightmare which by the form of the poem is made to seem thankfully brief. The ghostly viewpoint of the closing line, '[W]hen I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose,' creates an elegiac picture that updates the haunting of *In Memoriam* and presents the poetic voice as that of the mourned, and that also allows for a clinical awakening for the reader to the horror and reality of war, of which the other Middle Generation poets, through objection or ill-health, had scant experience.[4] Jarrell makes much of the savage irony of wartime propaganda, which seeks to deny the death and destruction that is obvious to everyone. Jarrell turns this on its head in 'Losses' which makes dying into an accepted day-to-day activity. He makes the point that once the war starts, all kinds of 'dying' become lost in the scrambling of truth, whether they were accidental, tragic or heroic. He speaks in a universal 'we' on behalf of those who died whatever the

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[3] Randall Jarrell, *Selected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1955; London: Faber and Faber, 1956), p. 158.

[4] 'My health oscillates between the indifferent and the unspeakable; the Army have rejected me.' (Letter from Berryman to Halliday 3 February 1942, in E. M. Halliday, *John Berryman and the Thirties: A Memoir* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p. 198. See also Paul Mariani, *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman* (New York: Morrow, 1990), p. 140).

circumstances:

> We died on the wrong page of the almanac,
> Scattered on mountains fifty miles away;
> Diving on haystacks, fighting with a friend,
> We blazed up on the lines we never saw.
> We died like aunts or pets or foreigners.

The poet repeats the word 'dying' to emphasize the mendacity in the euphemism of 'Losses,' and that '[W]hen we died they said, "Our casualties were low."' M. L. Rosenthal suggests that Jarrell's style in these poems leads to a rather grey melancholy compared with, say, Berryman's emotionally charged poems of loss:

> He focuses on the literal data of war — their irreversible actuality, and the pity of the human predicament implicit in that actuality [...] Letting the facts of war experience speak for themselves, Jarrell sank all his real poetic imagination into primary acts of empathy.[5]

For Robert Lowell, the move to a more prosaic style was the point at which his early promise was realized, in *Life Studies* of 1956. Not only does it include a prose piece as one of its four sections ('91 Revere Street'), but the poetry, while still occasionally adhering to certain metrical patterns, is more liberated and uncomplicated ni its prosody than any of Lowell's earlier, often more obscure work. Part Three contains four poems to literary figures of Lowell's past and present, Ford Madox Ford, George Santayana, Delmore Schwartz (still alive at this time) and Hart Crane. In contrast to Berryman's approach to elegy, Lowell puts all the apparent attention on the subject and none directly on himself. In 'Ford Madox Ford' the poet imagines a game of golf between Ford and Lloyd George. Lowell is on Ford's side and congratulates him on the witty remarks that he puts in his mouth: 'You answered, "What is art to me and thee? | Will a blacksmith teach a midwife how to bear?" | That cut the puffing statesman down to size, | Ford.'[6] The poem is in a rough pentameter, which gives Lowell the space for several eloquent lines, but opens with a line of dense plosives, 'The lobbed ball plops, then dribbles to the cup,' which somehow alerts the reader to the initial light-heartedness of the poem. It is worth noting the peculiarity of

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[5] M. L. Rosenthal, *Randall Jarrell* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972), p. 18.
[6] Robert Lowell, *Life Studies* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1959), p. 49.

the style in that it addresses its subject directly in the second person and proceeds to provide a plethora of biographical detail, as if telling Ford about his own life. This perhaps alludes to Ford's compulsive mendaciousness. After this series of facts of his life, the poet begins to question Ford's apparent decline, applying more gravity to his own emerging habit of tight alliteration: 'But master, mammoth mumbler, tell me why | the bales of your left-over novels buy | less than a bandage for your gouty foot.' Although the poem is perhaps rendered uneven by the density of factual material it deals with, it nevertheless closes eloquently: 'Fiction! I'm selling short | your lies that made the great your equals. Ford, | you were a kind man and you died in want.' Lowell makes unusual use of the idea of equality — he compliments Ford by saying that his 'lies' made the great his equals. Lowell doesn't elevate Ford to the level of the greats, but brings them up to his level. He gives Ford the highest praise by regarding him as the standard by which the greats are measured.

'For George Santayana' has an even more pronounced forward-looking, prosaic style, in its way something of a precursor to the conversational tone of more recent poetry, English and American. Like the previous piece it follows the second-person pattern of address, 'telling' the subject about his own life. The poet includes himself fleetingly in this instance:

> Later I used to dawdle
> past Circus and Mithraic Temple
> to *Santo Stefano* grown paper-thin
> like you from waiting....

The heretical slant of Santayana's biography is tacitly applauded by the poet. The dots after 'waiting' suggest that the wait is for death; the poet says that Santayana wished the sisters at the monastery where he died 'wouldn't bother their heads and yours by praying for your soul.' Lowell may have been devout in his Catholicism at the time of *Land of Unlikeness* but his commitment, however expressed elsewhere, is betrayed here at least by subtle expressions of a tired cynicism:

> Lying outside the consecrated ground
> forever now, you smile[...]
> [...]not like one
> who loses, but like one who'd won....

Santayana's smile represents a pyrrhic victory, since he has 'won' against those who would oppress him morally, while remaining forever outside 'the consecrated ground.' The poet expresses apparent affection for his subject's stubborn opposition to organized religion, presenting it as a marriage-trap: 'you died | near ninety, | still unbelieving, unconfessed and unreceived, | true to your boyish shyness of the bride.' As an elegy, the poem is notable for retaining elements of a philosophical discussion without losing sight of a necessary warmth towards its subject.

'Words for Hart Crane' is somewhat brutal when taken with the other poems in the group. Crane himself is the speaker, but this is not his characteristic poetic voice. Crane's own elegies are far more politely turned, linguistically difficult in the case of 'At Melville's Tomb' or fondly imitative in the case of 'To Emily Dickinson.' The latter is an attractive sonnet, slightly more effusive in language than Dickinson herself, but praising her 'stillness' elegantly. Lowell discards this elegance in favour of an eye-opening demand for understanding, words not for Hart Crane but by him.

He depicts Crane's literary jealousy:

> When the Pulitzers showered on some dope
> or screw who flushed our dry mouths out with soap,
> few people would consider why I took
> to stalking sailors, and scattered Uncle Sam's
> phoney gold-plated laurels to the birds.

As this passage suggests, the poem unflinchingly discusses Crane's homosexuality, and although he refers to it as a 'role' this is surely an ironic commentary on his public persona, as is perhaps his allusion to Whitman, also homosexual; this may further suggest that Crane was angered by literary ignorance in the American public, since he knew his Whitman 'like a book'. Crane here is made to be as controversial as perhaps Lowell wished him to be, making Crane describe himself as a sexual predator, 'wolfing down the stray lambs | who hungered by the Place de la Concorde.' The voice in the poem is harsh, but the poet behind the voice seems to remain sympathetic. By using the first person Lowell gives an unsettling view of his subject, who does not merely mourn for his own death but tells an untold story. He sets

conditions for those who treat the poet as public property: 'Who asks for me, the Shelley of my age, I must lay his heart out for my bed and board.'

Of the entire *Life Studies* collection, probably only 'Ford Madox Ford' and 'For George Santayana' could be considered as genuinely elegiac pieces in the traditional sense, yet it is not these poems that stand out in the volume as major explorations of death, and of what happens to a mind confronted by death. The poems that do this are in the fourth section and are themselves entitled, ironically, *Life Studies*. In this section Lowell makes a virtue of reminiscence, moulding his memories to a distinctively subdued, conversational tone that has perhaps had a wide influence on much subsequent poetry. Lowell builds these poems around specific instances in the life of his subject, often stringing them unobtrusively together into a telling narrative. His point of view, like Roethke's in *The Lost Son*, is a child's but with a more observant adult overview. Unlike Roethke, however, Lowell's child voice is already bitter and world weary, and disputes its own immaturity. In 'My Last Afternoon With Uncle Devereux Winslow' the poet is keen to mention that 'I was five and a half', as if to increase the importance of how complete and insightful his memory is: 'I wasn't a child at all— I unseen and all-seeing, I was Agrippina I in the Golden House of Nero.' The poet is eager to emphasize the precocious powers of his memory, giving such a vivid and perceptive portrait of one day with his family, stressing his own maturity at the age of five and a half, while his grandfather tells his aunt and uncle: '"You are behaving like children."' The poet's sketch of his grandfather's summer house has a careful attentiveness to a series of details which represent for the poet his grandfather's personality: 'Like my Grandfather, the décor I was manly, comfortable, I overbearing, disproportioned.' Interestingly the poem seems to shed more light on the poet's grandfather than on Uncle Devereux, and though he is rendered as overbearing, the grandfather garners more sympathy. The poet's cynicism, which lingers below the surface throughout, emerges in his portrayal of a man whose life has stopped halfway through; Lowell gives his five-year-old voice a definite coldness with regard to his uncle. He writes of 'the white measuring

door | my Grandfather had pencilled with my Uncle's heights. | In 1911, he had stopped growing at just six feet,' and seems surprised that 'just six feet' is a height at which to stop growing. In his closing description of his uncle, the poet produces a series of dehumanizing metaphors, as if convinced that, beyond his assertion that '[M]y uncle was dying at twenty-nine,' he is at this point already dead:

> He was as brushed as Bayard, our riding horse.
> His face was putty.
> His blue coat and white trousers
> grew sharper and straighter.
> His coat was a blue jay's tail,
> his trousers were solid cream from the top of the bottle.

His closing image, although it results in an attractive symmetry for the poem, is distinctly sour in its assertion of Uncle Devereux's doom:

> My hands were warm, then cool, on the piles
> of earth and lime,
> a black pile and a white pile....
> Come winter,
> Uncle Devereux would blend to the one color.

The fact that such a line is spoken, theoretically, by a five year old child makes it all the more unsettling; his complete awareness of the situation almost suggests he is responsible for his uncle's fate, like some gothic child embodying doom. The narrator's awareness of his position is quite different in 'Grandparents' since he is speaking as an adult, and his reminiscence is not tinged with coldness but a genuine sense of loss, which builds through the poem. He opens with a deceptively matter-of-fact tone, remarking that his grandparents are 'altogether otherworldly now,' but as his aggregation of memories becomes a realization that his inheritance of their farm corresponds with loneliness, the poem gains in emotive force, until his outburst in the billiard room which is full of rich associations: 'Grandpa! Have me, Hold me, cherish me! | Tears smut my fingers.' Yet the poet cannot sustain his loyalty to his grandfather's memory and needlessly doodles on one of his magazines. This inexplicable bathos is characteristic of a number of Lowell's poems at this time, in which, after expressing some form of sympathy towards their subject, feel compelled to reject to some extent the feeling just expressed. His *Life Studies* poems invoke a

modern sense of the elegiac through the poet's ambivalent feelings towards those whose decline he chronicles. However the ambivalence is problematic in that it appears to derive not from an internalization or transference of the poet's anger at loss but from a genuine and long-standing ambivalence; it is not aroused by a state of grief but seems to be part of poetics of misanthropy.

'Commander Lowell,' despite its inclusion of the dates of his life, is surely as far from the consolatory or laudatory elegy as one can get while still recalling the life and death of an individual. There is very little explicit respectfulness here for his father. The poem does not show sadness at his death but at his wasted life and ineffectuality. He is merciless in showing mocking pity for his own '[P]oor father,' whose early career is made good only because he was 'once successful enough to be lost | in the mob of ruling-class Bostonians'. By closing with it he places emphasis on a recollection that is the only action Lowell's father performed that he regards as successful, the only thing he seems proud of: '[A]nd once | nineteen, the youngest ensign in his class, he was "the old man" of a gunboat on the Yangtze.' The coldness of the poet's recording of this event, however, removes any hint of pride. The emphasis given to this memory seems to put the other ignominies in a yet starker light. This act was not enough for Lowell, because it was the highpoint of his father's life, when he was nineteen years old; its significance is balanced against another memory that 'In three years | he squandered sixty thousand dollars.' Hobsbaum notes that Lowell's art in poems of the dead deals with persona by way of recreation, calling it 'the poetry of reminiscence'; he goes on to say:

> As we saw from his poems about Ford, Santayana, Schwartz and Crane, he is able not only to invoke but to re-create. Further, the vivacity of his recreation has more than a hint of humorous scepticism which gives life not only to 'Commander Lowell' but to its two sequels, 'Terminal Days at Beverly Farms' and 'Father's Bedroom.'[7]

Hobsbaum does find 'Commander Lowell' sympathetic, but does not deal with certain damning lines in the poem which take it beyond 'humorous scepticism.' Amid the humour, the poet is clearly ashamed of his father, his lack of seriousness, and his

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[7] Philip Hobsbaum, *A Reader's Guide to Robert Lowell* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), p. 84.

hopeless optimism. He refers to him as '[C]heerful and cowed', but claims that 'he was never one of the crowd'. He is embarrassed by his naivety, that he 'deeded Mother his property', and that 'whenever he left a job, | he bought a smarter car'.

In 'Terminal Days at Beverly Farms' the first thing the poet mentions is a 'portly, uncomfortable boulder' which leads the reader inevitably to associate the image with his father, mentioned directly afterwards; his subsequent description of him is as a 'vitally trim' healthy old man, the opposite of anything 'portly' or 'uncomfortable,' yet somehow 'a shade too ruddy.' All the health in the poem lies with Lowell's father, yet illness and discomfort seem to lie all around: 'the scarlet late August sumac, | multiplying like cancer | at their garden's border.' His father seems cheerfully unaware of his impending demise. He 'had had two coronaries', but still rose in the morning 'inattentive and beaming'. He dies after a morning of 'anxious, repetitive smiling'. Lowell's observation of his father is witty yet remarkably detached. He carefully and unsentimentally presents a picture of a man who puts on too brave a face to save himself from humiliation. He ends with a joke of deep irony, recalling that 'his last words to Mother were: | "I feel awful"'. The poet does not rage against his father as Berryman did at length, but portrays his ignominy and decline with both a weary resignation and savage accuracy.

The shorter poems on his father that follow are no less accurate but more subtle in their humour and more concerned with things than people. In 'Father's Bedroom', the poet surveys the empty domain of his father almost in the manner of a scene-of-the-crime report. He takes a delight reminiscent of William Carlos Williams in the clarity of his observation: 'The broad planked floor | had a sandpapered neatness.' The elaborateness suggests further that the poet is prepared to show affection, tinged with regret, but only towards the things his father left behind, and not to him personally. This reads like the work of a man almost missing his father, not overflowing with grief in the full view of his audience, as one might say was Berryman's wont. The quiet *Life Studies* tone could not contain *The Dream Songs*' spitting on graves and picking the brains of the 'violent dead' without shattering its

stylistic unity. However strong Lowell's sense of betrayal by his father may have been, and it could well have been as strong as Berryman's, for the purposes of this volume, he kept it tightly controlled under a film of careful observational poetry. The oriental references of 'Father's Bedroom' resonate with the mention in 'Commander Lowell' of the father's one good achievement in a gunship on the Yangtze, which is referred to in the closing lines by a proud mother: '"This book has had hard usage | on the Yangtze River, China. | It was left under an open | porthole in a storm."' Stephen Matterson compares 'My Papa's Waltz' with 'Father's Bedroom,' suggesting that the poets' different approaches to symbolism in these poems reflect their attitude towards their subject, that is, their fathers:

> Because the father owned these objects he connected them in spite of being disparate. But at his death the connection they had is lost [...] Roethke restored and reaffirmed the connection the waltz made between son and father. Lowell's poem has no such centre, no symbolic meaning or presence that can unite things in the bedroom.[8]

'For Sale' is similar to the above poem in its brevity of phrase. It opens with a partial personification of 'my Father's cottage'. The poet packs a great deal of meaning into this short work. The house was 'organized with prodigal animosity' – a phrase easily glanced over at first before one might recognize its compact and tart descriptiveness, associating a house so tidy with an intimidating neurotic unfriendliness. It works in a similar way to his father's call of 'Anchors Aweigh!' in the bath in 'Commander Lowell'; it gives a tragi-comic picture of his father's insensitivity to himself and his surroundings. The cottage is portrayed as a 'sheepish plaything' as if, cast aside by a petulant owner, it awaits, on tenterhooks, some sort of punishment:

> its town-house furniture
> had an on tiptoe air
> of waiting for the mover
> on the heels of the undertaker.

The poem has a mournful closing image of his lonely mother, who 'mooned in a window, | as if she had stayed on a train | one stop past her destination'. Mazzaro

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[8] Stephen Matterson, *Berryman and Lowell: the Art of Losing* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 62.

notes that Lowell's approach to such a scene is vastly different to his earlier style: 'A few years earlier he might have used the incident to parallel Andromache's grief for Hector or Anna's grief for Dido.'[9] In *Life Studies* the nakedness of Lowell's language is its strength. This sympathetic but sad image of his mourning mother dovetails nicely into the next poem 'Sailing Home from Rapallo', which recalls her death in Italy and the journey home with her body. The poem is striking for its almost instant expression of sadness: 'after twenty minutes I could imagine your final week, I and tears ran down my cheeks.' After the dry wit of the poems about his father, there is an unexpected emotional directness. Yet the poem continues in a mode of rather black humour, and seemingly inappropriate observations:

> The crazy yellow and azure sea-sleds
> blasting like jack-hammers across
> the *spumante*-bubbling wake of our liner,
> recalled the clashing colors of my Ford.

The poet continues by mordantly remarking: 'Mother travelled first-class in the hold.' The prevailing impression one gets of Lowell's attitude to his parents, dead or alive, is that he saw it all as farce. This seems confirmed in this poem, where his father is once again shown a little disdain, even in the choice of his pink gravestone and his motto which 'seemed too businesslike and pushing here.' The farce is raised in the closing stanza in which the lettering on Lowell's mother's coffin 'had been misspelled LOVEL,' and Lowell concludes in the same tone with the remark 'The corpse I was wrapped like *panetone* in Italian tinfoil.'

Compare this with the affectionate, if sometimes world weary, portraits of his grandfather. 'Dunbarton', like the other poems of *Life Studies*, is disarming in its prosaic, understated tone, but unlike 'Commander Lowell', for instance, it displays a sincere joy in the experiences it reprises; moreover, the pressure of inheritance and the problematic legacy created by every death in the Lowell/Winslow family is complicated here by Lowell's preference for his grandfather over his father. The poet goes to an unusual extreme in poeticizing his love for his grandfather: 'He was my

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[9] Jerome Mazzaro, *The Poetic Themes of Robert Lowell* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), p. 108.

Father. I was his son.' The poet and his grandfather enjoy 'get-aways from Boston.' In a telling moment the two perform what the poet is doing in literary form: 'Grandfather and I | raked dead leaves from our dead forebears.' Whereas the poet highlights his father's achievement on the Yangtze and thereby contrasts it with his more numerous failures, in this poem he almost casually tells how he 'borrowed Grandfather's cane | carved with the names and altitudes | of Norwegian mountains he had scaled', restraining his pride in his grandfather's achievements where he had inflated the scorn for his father's. Lowell seems concerned to make his affection for his grandfather as pronounced as he can, as in the rather Freudian ending: 'In the mornings I cuddled like a paramour | in my Grandfather's bed, | while he scouted about the chattering greenwood stove.' Hobsbaum believes that *Life Studies* 'is[...]the picture of a society in decay', but that 'in portraying such a society, Lowell does not succumb to it.'[10] Certainly his detachment and his wry overview of his own family makes for a thoroughly original vision of death and legacy.

The Middle Generation poets display, in facets of their work; a fear of being forgotten in the history of twentieth-century literature, combined with a recurring sense of unavoidable doom. Of all the members of the group perhaps the most intense expression of this doom comes from Delmore Schwartz. In his notable essay 'The Isolation of Modern Poetry' he gives a critical voice to this anxiety:

> The fundamental isolation of the modern poet began not with the poet and his way of life; but rather with the whole way of life of modern society. It was not so much the poet as it was poetry, culture, sensibility, imagination, that were isolated.[11]

While the essay gives an insightful picture of the poet separated from the everyday modern world, Schwartz appears simultaneously to be abstracting his own real fear into something more academic. He continues from the above passage, to write that 'culture, since it could not find a place in modern life, has fed upon itself increasingly and has created its own autonomous satisfactions.' Douglas Dunn, in his introduction to a collection of Schwartz's work, sees the danger of poetry feeding upon itself: 'As

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[10] Hobsbaum, p. 94.
[11] *Selected Essays of Delmore Schwartz*, p. 7.

the disintegration of his personality gathered momentum Schwartz may well have turned his knowledge of theatrical aloneness into an actual misery.'[12] However, while Schwartz's physical isolation was, in his lifetime, all too real (his miserable death in a cheap hotel and the fact that his body 'lay unclaimed three days'(Dream Song 151 attests to this), I believe that his own and his contemporaries' fears about their literary legacy are unfounded. His vision of an encroaching philistinism seems far more applicable to the present day than the 1940s. What I believe had changed by Schwartz's time was not the size but the nature of the poetry audience. The perceived decline of modern poetry has perhaps been brought about by the comparative expansion of alternative media, by modernity. I feel that the Middle Generation poets were modern in a way that Eliot, Pound and Auden were not. Berryman and his contemporaries were the first group of poets who existed genuinely as academics — that is to say, who were academics first, poets second. In contrast to Schwartz's belief that poetry and culture were on divergent paths, I feel that this may have been the first time, in retrospect, that poetry had become part of the world of fashionable things. The 'movements' which could be traced in poetry of the past had now become trends, a topic of intellectual conversation on the same level as cinema or popular fiction. Poetry had become something to be critically dissected in little magazines; Eliot provided footnotes to aid the reader in this enterprise. Schwartz expresses the view in his essay 'The Vocation of the Poet in the Modern World' that 'it is mostly poets who read any poetry', but I feel this sense of isolation is personal rather than critical, and that perhaps more than other critics of the time, Schwartz allows his personal experience to influence his critical judgement, and to an extent the objective element of his poetics.[13] The dominant theme of Schwartz's poetics seems to be reducible to the poet's identification with Hamlet. Moreover, the reader senses that all the figures with whom Schwartz identifies are yoked to this primary empathy, in perhaps the same way that figures with whom Henry identifies in *The Dream Songs* are moulded in their relation to him by his relationship with his father. That Berryman might, given

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[12] Douglas Dunn, *What Is To Be Given* (Introduction)(Manchester: Carcanet New Poems, 1976), p. xii.
[13] *Selected Essays of Delmore Schwartz,* p. 25.

his biography, have seen himself in a similar state to Hamlet and by extension to Schwartz, seems confirmed by the depth of identification with Schwartz in Berryman's elegies to him. It is vital to note that Schwartz's own poetry has a strong sense of the elegiac, and indeed his poetic rendering of this may be compared with Berryman's, its derivation being fundamental to his projection of voice. In his laudatory poem 'Lincoln', Schwartz refers to him as a 'Hamlet-man.' He finds it 'just and true' (and perhaps ironic) that a nation of 'fugitives' be ruled by Lincoln, 'this failure, this unwilling bridegroom.' He presents a very different figure of Lincoln from that with which we are familiar; this Lincoln is anxious, almost suicidal:

> He studied law, but knew in his own soul
> Despair's anarchy, terror and error,
> — Instruments had to be taken from his office
> And from his bedroom in such days of horror,
> Because some saw that he might kill himself.

Whatever the accuracy of this portrait, the initial reflection is onto the poet; that he chooses such a perspective is almost expected in the context of the poems of *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities* as a whole. A poem such as 'Father and Son' demonstrates that despite the diversity of their respective styles, the Middle Generation poets shared to varying extents a crucial concern, which was generation itself; in the poem, the son says: 'Father, you're not Polonius, you're reticent, | But sure.' The son is resentful of the wise father, giving instruction about time and death, which he thinks is premature advice; the ominous language Schwartz uses echoes the warnings of the ghost of Hamlet's father:

> You must let me tell you what you fear
> When you wake up from sleep, still drunk with sleep:
> You are afraid of time and its slow drip,
> Like melting ice, like smoke upon the air [...]
> Your guilt is nameless, because its name is time,
> Because its name is death.

Schwartz uses the mysterious dialogue of the poem to elicit a series of complex philosophical ideas, revolving around the inevitability of death and the need to accept this and the 'guilt of time' with which the father associates the proximity of death. To demonstrate his instruction, the father returns to Shakespeare:

Begin to understand the first decision.
Hamlet is the example; only dying
Did he take up his manhood, the dead's burden,
Done with evasion, done with sighing,
Done with revery.

It might be suggested that in this celebrated early poetry Schwartz has an ironically clear view of the urgency of his task and the need not to waste his time; yet in the voice of the father of the above poem, the poet seems simultaneously to accept that while his time is limited, his task will only be fulfilled in his death. The reasoning voice which implores the son to be aware of his guilt and to confront it also tells him to remain guilty: 'Be guilty of yourself in the full looking-glass.'

This particular final image recurs in a number of the poems of this collection, notably 'The Sin of Hamlet.' This image has an interesting resonance with the famous picture of the young Schwartz, photographed at the time of his early fame, staring anxiously into a mirror. The poem opens with tremendous atmosphere, a gothic eeriness of unexplained sounds, 'noising dim sorrow, calling | To sleep is it? I think so, and childhood'. The call to sleep has an obvious reference, linked with the title; in addition it reminds one of Schwartz's renowned insomnia, which he explores further in other poems, and from which both Berryman and Lowell also suffered. Schwartz uses several subtle techniques to create a sense of increasing unease, beginning the final stanza 'And when it comes, escape is small' without elucidating further what 'it' is and, like Berryman, allowing the reader's imagination to wander. He continues with the disturbing phrase 'the worms of fear spread veins', which is ambivalent in meaning but conveys precisely to the reader the intended sensation of paranoia, racing anxiety and cold fear; indeed such phrases, which Schwartz produces regularly in this collection, have a remarkable quality whereby they bypass the apparent meaning of their constituent words and express something deeper which could not be provided by any substitution or reinterpretation, whose meaning could not be articulated other than by that phrase. The culmination of the fear expressed here is not any external terror, but rather the sight of oneself. Again, the connection between death and guilt is

reiterated at the end of the poem, when 'the furtive | Fugitive, looking backward, sees his | Ghost in the mirror, his shameful eyes, his mouth diseased.' The character's reflection is not just of himself but of his 'Ghost', and he sees the common anxiety-dream image of the rotten mouth. As elsewhere the fear portrayed is one borne of great guilt, with the poem's character being described as a 'furtive | Fugitive' with 'shameful eyes.' Here, as in other poems, Schwartz seems determined to get to the heart of psychological discomfort; looking back on life, the consequences of this for peace of mind seem severe. His belief in the necessity for the poet to analyse himself in such a way cannot be doubted, however, and in his essay 'The Literary Dictatorship of T. S. Eliot,' Schwartz attacks Eliot's assessment of *Hamlet* as a failure for Hamlet's lack of an 'objective correlative.' Schwartz feels that Shakespeare should be praised not criticized for attempting to express the inexpressible:

> The poet's honesty, and thus his morality, consists in his ability to face the ecstasy and the terror of his emotions, his desires, his fears, his aspirations, and his failure to realize his and other human beings' moral allegiances. Thus the morality of the poet consists not in teaching other human beings how to behave, but in facing the deepest emotional and moral realities in his poem, and in the way making it possible for his readers to confront the total reality of their existence, physical, emotional, moral and religious.[14]

I believe that in the above statement lies the crux of Schwartz's personal poetics, and to an extent that of his Middle Generation contemporaries. Their desire, duty, or compulsion to grasp the nettle, emotionally, was the key to their success in the context of the history of poetry, but was also enormously damaging to them personally. For Schwartz, the most useful reference point for the confrontation of 'total reality' is *Hamlet*, and all of its psychological significance. In his published journals, he writes that 'Freud was the great genius' and goes on to discuss Freud's view of Hamlet, that the death of Shakespeare's father a year before the writing of the play was crucial. Clearly Schwartz's interest in the play is not merely academic; at times it can appear obsessive. It is probably worth remarking that the name of his first wife was Gertrude.

This preoccupation with *Hamlet* may confirm to the critic of this particular period and area of poetry that its authors were somehow locked into the unhappy

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[14] *Selected Essays of Delmore Schwartz*, p. 322.

outcome of society and of their own lives which is implicitly portrayed in their work. The fate to which the Middle Generation felt condemned seems self-fulfilling when one looks at the work of Schwartz, Berryman and Lowell. In particular. Schwartz's preoccupation with Hamlet can only suggest to the reader an intense identification with the character and with the play's picture of the troubled, fatherless thinker, a picture which resonates across the biographies of many of Schwartz's contemporaries. Berryman is perhaps closest to the actual plot, in that his mother remarried very soon after the death of his father, the death and the marriage both being subject to suspicious circumstances. Interestingly Berryman does not dwell upon the play and the questions it raises to anything like the same extent as Schwartz, yet the reflection the play has upon his own life is remarkable. It may simply be that in the exploration of the psyche which any poet undertakes, Berryman found he could more effectively work with a complex pattern of allusions, literary and otherwise, and that to inundate his poetry with such a familiar motif, however pertinent, would simply be unsuited to the distinctively modern idiom that he had created for himself.

Just as Berryman and Schwartz differ in their use of multiple references and a unifying motif respectively, they can similarly be compared through their imaging of the poetic self; where Berryman employs numerous characters and registers surrounding a protean protagonist, Schwartz relies on a single poetic persona, multiplied only when in the company of his own reflection. Where Berryman's fragmentary point of view might be regarded as schizophrenic, Schwartz's obsession with the reflection of oneself seems to be engendered purely by intense paranoia. 'By Circumstances Fed' continues this obsession. Unlike 'The Sin of Hamlet', however, the reflection here arouses not fear, merely sadness:

> So, once in the drugstore,
> Amid all the poppy, salve, and ointment,
> I suddenly saw, estranged there,
> Beyond all disappointment,
> My own face in the mirror.

Despite Berryman's memory of his 'flagrant[...]young male beauty', Schwartz's image of self is despairing.

Eileen Simpson, Berryman's first wife, recalls in her memoir *Poets in their Youth* that when Berryman, Schwartz and Simpson sat down in a New York restaurant, Schwartz insisted on changing places with her:

> Delmore stood up and, with some embarrassment, asked if I would mind changing places with him. The waiter had seated me where he wanted to sit. He had to have his back to the wall; it made him anxious to have anyone sitting behind him.[15]

Simpson remarks that the thoughts in Schwartz's head were akin to those expressed in his poem 'Do the Others Speak of Me Mockingly, Maliciously?' The poem begins in a tone of hysteria, the poet unforgiving about those who talk behind his back: 'I'll whirl about, denounce them, saying | That they are shameless, they are treacherous, | No more my friends'. In the second stanza, however, he has to admit that he too has talked about people in this way: 'I know the reason why, I too have done this, | Cruel for wit's sake, behind my dear friend's back.' In admitting his complicity in the general malaise of gossip as he sees it, the poet's paranoia is modulated into a melancholic picture of human nature; he bemoans his own desire to 'free myself of friendship's necessity' just for the sake of amusement among others, and remarks upon 'How cruel it is | That pride and wit distort the heart of man'.

In 'The Heavy Bear Who Goes With Me', Schwartz's thematic references to his self-image are given a schizophrenic element, different to that used by Berryman but interesting in comparison nevertheless. The heavy bear is the poet's own body, with which he feels unfairly burdened, and in which he is trapped. The poet's self-consciousness is stylistically manifested by a metre suggesting the oversized body of the poet, as the most evocative lines such as 'Clumsy and lumbering here and there' burst out of the iambic norms of Schwartz's verse into a more descriptive dactyllic 'bounce'. The poet is burdened not only with the bear's weight but with his fears, when he 'Howls in his sleep because the tight-rope | Trembles and shows the darkness beneath.' This allusion to the animal, instinctive world of the subconscious brings the poem to its concluding stanza, where the 'inescapable animal' is not merely the poet's

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[15] Eileen Simpson, *Poets in Their Youth* (New York: Random House, 1983), p. 15.

body but the uncontrolled, unthinking side of his personality, led by 'appetite' alone. The bear 'moves where I move, distorting my gesture'; it constantly subverts the intentions of his mind, and those of the body triumph, the bear

> Stretches to embrace the very dear
> With whom I would walk without him near,
> Touches her grossly, although a word
> Would bare my heart and make me clear.

Ultimately the bear represents the discrepancy between the poet's aspirations and his reality. While he seeks to confront the unexplained fears that plague him, he blames this submerged element of his persona for the mistakes he makes in his daily life.

This poem's exploration of the conflict between the sensitive mind and the acquisitive body is extended in Schwartz's elegiac poem 'Yeats Died Saturday In France.'

> Yeats died Saturday in France.
> Freedom from his animal
> Has come at last in alien Nice,
> His heart beat separate from his will:
> He knows at last the old abyss
> Which always faced his staring face.

Yeats's death figured as 'freedom from his animal.' has an immediate consonance with Schwartz's own 'animal' poem, and a further link with Yeats's poetic persona, his mythological and spiritual concerns, and his late 'Circus Animals' Desertion', itself a commentary on his own legend. Schwartz makes reference to Yeats's awareness of the world beyond death, suggesting that, like the father in 'Father and Son', he had death in him throughout his life: 'He knows at last the old abyss | which always faced his staring face.' Just as Berryman did not flinch from portraying the subjects of his elegies in their better and worse moments, Schwartz allows the fluidity of his language to give the reader an ambivalent picture of Yeats without saying anything overtly deprecatory. There are multiple possibilities of meaning particularly in the second stanza, where Schwartz writes: 'No ability, no dignity | Can fail him who trained so long | For the outrage of eternity.' The poet could be saying that these qualities are redundant in eternity, or that they cannot cause Yeats problems now,

implying that they did in his lifetime. In his 1939 essay 'The Poet as Poet' Schwartz writes that Yeats's career

> exhibits, looking backward, the process of a bad poet of the nineties becoming a great poet in middle age. Henceforth no poet can be regarded as utterly hopeless: the possibility of a Yeatsian miracle will always present itself.[16]

He presents this possibility as if to provide comfort to some unnamed struggling writer, perhaps himself; he continues:

> During the years in which the change began to show itself, Yeats was faced with failures of various sorts. His early fame had begun to wane, his long courtship of one woman had ended in emptiness.[17]

This essay, interestingly, was written at the peak of Schwartz's fame and the end of Yeats's life; it is as if he had a prescient vision of his own potential for failure, such is his interest in the changes undergone by Yeats.

When a poet has such a famous and eventful life, it seems inevitable that any observation he makes cannot be observed and comprehended merely for itself but becomes part of the cults of personality which have fluctuated in popularity throughout the history of literature and which can sometimes be damaging contributors to the kind of crisis of notoriety which befell Schwartz. The purity of the idea which the poet, in critical mode, posits in his essay becomes sullied by the association of the idea with the biography of the poet. The decline experienced by Schwartz suggests that he was not necessarily willing to have his art and his life so closely connected. Whereas the poets of the past who were notable for their biographies, such as Byron and Shelley for example, were apparently living their lives as partial expressions of their art and were inescapably controversial characters, the controversy of Schwartz's life came initially from the success, and subsequent failure, of his poetry. The difficulties in his life arose not out of his own activities at first but out of the critical reception of his early work and the pressure he felt as a result. It is this impulsion to equal his early success that has led critics to perceive a tragic

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16 *Selected Essays of Delmore Schwartz* p. 72.
17 *ibid.*, p. 74.

fulfilment of the anxious poet's fears, and in some cases to suggest that Schwartz and some of his contemporaries saw it as their destiny gradually to destroy themselves, artistically and physically. In a general work on American literature, Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury write that 'Schwartz evokes the anguished misunderstood artist in the modern world, a fate that Schwartz and similar writers both welcomed and endured as part of their gift.'[18] To say that Schwartz 'welcomed' his fate seems extreme, considering what his fate entailed; however, it could be argued that he was somehow aware of what his life might have in store, and that as he sought poetically to confront the darkest problems of his psyche, it was inevitable that he would suffer emotionally. Facing the 'ecstasy and the terror' was not something that Schwartz welcomed, but in demanding such honesty of himself, he was following a path of creativity that, like Berryman and Lowell in particular, could have detrimental consequences. In reviewing a selection of Schwartz's correspondence, James Wood remarks that 'American writing is soaked in the idea of its own difficulty', and refers to the 'doomed wager' into which the American poet enters.[19] While accepting the notion of the poet confronting the difficulty of producing what is inside his mind, I feel that certain critics can be prone to exaggeration about the consciousness of the doomed poet. Such intense personal conflicts may be inferred from analyses of the poetry, and this is of course the task of the critic, but while such deductions are attractive they can at times obscure the work itself. The ignorance of one's work in favour of one's life is surely not the legacy any poet wishes to leave behind. One of the problems of the picture of the doomed poet is that in subsequent generations of critics, the picture will begin to absorb the art entirely, until it seems that the poet was famous only for his life in the first place, and that his work would never have had the notoriety it achieved if he had lived a long and peaceful existence. In the past this might be said of Chatterton, and more recently has been said of Sylvia Plath. One might note that such tragic figures themselves become immortalized not only in their

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[18] Richard Ruland & Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: a History of American Literature* (New York: Viking, 1991), p. 407.
[19] James Wood, 'Convoy of Woes', review of *Delmore Schwartz and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (ed. Robert Phillips), *The Guardian* (24 August 1993), p. 11.

own work, but in the elegies others write for them; Chatterton is mentioned in *Adonais*, Plath is mourned by Berryman. Schwartz's position as an elegist, in this view, might be that of one who, more than making the act of remembrance part of his poetics, is an embodiment of that act. His use of self-image is basically elegiac in that it is imbued with the knowledge that it mourns the tragedy latent in his current life, and which he knows will end in further tragedy.

Schwartz undoubtedly struggled later in life with the vagaries of the critical world and with his own inability to produce consistent work after *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*. Like Berryman and Lowell, he suffered physically from the demands of producing good poetry, and perhaps from spending so much time confronting 'the terror' of deeper psychological trauma. One symptom of this suffering was insomnia, 'night sweats', about which all three poets write. Schwartz does so in 'In The Naked Bed, In Plato's Cave' to great effect. He describes with unerring accuracy the sights and sounds which distract the insomniac:

> Reflected headlights slowly slid the wall,
> Carpenters hammered under the shaded window,
> Wind troubled the window curtains all night long,
> A fleet of trucks strained uphill, grinding[...]
> The ceiling lightened again, the slanting diagram
> Slid slowly forth.

Despite the apparently aimless recollection of experience in the poem, it is deceptively systematic, the first stanza's descriptiveness framing the poet's only action: 'I rose from bed, lit a cigarette, | And walked to the window.' The second stanza follows a similar pattern, as the poet depicts the gradual arrival of daylight ('Morning, softly melting the air'). The physical action of the first stanza is complemented by the mental action of the metaphysical inquiry at the close of the poem, which temporally signifies the beginning of the day, into the reasons for his anxious sleeplessness:

> O son of man, the ignorant night, the travail
> Of early morning, the mystery of beginning
> Again and again,
> while History is unforgiven.

The orderliness of such a poem, and its outwardly musical presentation suggest that regardless of the intensity of the subject matter, Schwartz was fully in control of his medium at this time; it seems clear from the outset that he was not merely purging his soul of demons but ordering his experience into a transcendent form that disguises its craft with an intelligent use of classical poetic diction which does not jar with its modern setting. John Crowe Ransom comments:

> He has a natural command of the poetic language, and that is what few poets have today, even the noted ones. You do not take his lines apart and see how they are made. He has the gift of the fused, indivisible poetic style.[20]

This suggests an almost old-fashioned attitude on the part of this 'New' critic; he talks of 'poetic language' as an accepted term, when at the time of writing it was presumably rather contentious. Nevertheless he does define a particular fluidity that separates Schwartz from his more modern-sounding contemporaries. There is something archaic in the sound of Schwartz's work; Douglas Dunn remarks that 'He was always an artificial, cultured poet attracted to the gaiety of dance and music of fireworks' and comments upon his 'mannered invocation [...] contrived to the point of the utmost preciosity.'[21] Schwartz's language is not always so florid, however, and in 'The Ballad of the Children of the Czar' he employs a relatively simple diction to clarify the ingenious formal principles of the poem. It bears interesting comparison with Berryman's 'The Ball Poem' in its use of inanimate objects as the focus for a number of shifting points of view. Schwartz's poem uses a stark, image-based conflict between a ball, the moon, and 'Papa's face', which jar against each other more harshly than metaphor. The 'bald, white' moon is compared to Nicholas' face; but any mention of Papa is bound to have other associations in a poem by Schwartz, whose father died when he was a child. It is 'Sister' who compares the ball to her father's face, before hurling 'the white ball forth.' The phrase suggests some form of resentment towards the father by way of the proximity of the two images it contains.

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[20] John Crowe Ransom, in Robert Phillips, *Delmore Schwartz: Last and Lost Poems* (Foreword)(New York: Vanguard Press, 1979), p. xii.
[21] *What Is To Be Given*, p.xiv.

This conflation of imagery is reiterated on a larger scale by the poet's recollection of his own situation compared to that of the children: 'Six thousand miles apart, | In Brooklyn, in 1916, | Aged two, irrational.' This simultaneity conforms to the poem's overall structural principle, which turns upon microcosmic significance and temporal and spatial comparison. The microcosmic significance can be found in small, seemingly unconnected descriptive lines, and parallel histories, which are slowly brought together by the poem's spatial comparisons, such as between life in America and in Russia; and its temporal comparisons between generations. The poem compares father and child, and emphasizes the secret knowledge of the child; the children of the poem are depicted from their own frame of mind but with the clarity and perception of an adult. The relative importance of childhood play and adult awareness is given by a further spatial comparison between the ball and the world: 'The ground on which the ball bounces | Is another bouncing ball.'

The difference between this poem and the others in his early collections indicates Schwartz's willingness to experiment stylistically, even though he is regarded as having a very particular early style. In 'Dogs Are Shakespearean, Children Are Strangers', he approaches a thematically similar poem from an entirely different perspective. The initial thematic purpose of the poem is in fact unclear, and the use of 'Shakespearean' to describe dogs is inexplicable; furthermore the title is partly contradicted by the first refrain, 'they are strangers, they are Shakespearean', which is less exclusive. The meaning becomes clearer in the second stanza, where the poet is asking rhetorical questions of Freud and Wordsworth about the secret and instinctual knowledge of children and animals: 'The dog in humble inquiry along the ground, | The child who credits dreams and fears the dark, | Know more and less than you.' He asks us to notice how children and animals 'Welcome strangers but study daily things, | Knowing that heaven and hell surround us'. Where 'The Ballad of the Children of the Czar' left a certain amount of the philosophical thrust of the poem to the reader's imagination and deduction, this poem has a more Yeatsian, Jungian atmosphere, expressing a deep concern with the hidden self that has been suppressed

by formal human life, but at the same time discounting dreams and myths as mysterious but insufficient:

> This which we live behind our unseen faces,
> Is neither dream, nor childhood, neither
> Myth, nor landscape, final, nor finished,
> For we are incomplete and know no future,
> And we are howling or dancing out our souls.

Schwartz suggests of man in general that 'we are incomplete'. As I shall stress in discussion of Berryman's use of the Henry persona (Chapter Four), Henry is shown not to understand this and hence may be used to illustrate one's attempt to achieve spiritual wholeness. Schwartz implies an acceptance of this state as the lot of humanity. Although Schwartz's versatility here is an advantage, it may be that it played a part in his downfall. Where the critics viewed his first collection as a coherent whole, his subsequent modifications did not impress. Perhaps the critical public wanted him to duplicate *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities* for the rest of his career. If true, this is a shame, for much of his later work is of greater worth than is generally asserted. It lacks the grandeur of his early work, but is not necessarily worse. 'America! America!' is reminiscent of Whitman, especially 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry', in its use of the firm, proclamatory 'I am'. The poet wants to update Whitman's voice to suit the modern metropolis: 'This is the song of the natural self in the twentieth century.' 'Metro-Goldwyn Mayer' refers back to Schwartz's essay on isolation, and the changing mores of the middle classes: 'I looked toward the movie, the common dream, | The he and she in close-ups, nearer than life, | And I accepted such things as they seem.' The poet puts himself in the position of the average movie-goer who accepts what he sees as real, the twentieth-century equivalent of the novel, where the suspension of disbelief, the pact between author and reader, had been to some extent lost. Since the advent of the modernist novel, the author had begun to enjoy reminding the reader of the artifice of the text. The cinema returned the consumer of culture to the ease of willing acceptance of fiction.

The intelligence and thematic coherence that Schwartz displays in these late works belies the accepted opinion that he wasted a great deal of time on worthless

work, and that by the end of his career neurosis had eaten away at his poetic sensibilities. This prevailing opinion is perhaps part of the continued belief that Schwartz was of more literary and historical importance by becoming more reclusive and unstable than by producing a worthy body of work. This is not to say that Schwartz was not unstable, but that he represented more than the tortured artist put upon by society. Even at times of great stress he was still writing intelligent essays and poetry, despite his reported delusions and intense paranoia. What caused Berryman to write about him with such passion is not merely the decline in his fortunes but the shock of losing a friend at an early age, after so many losses already. The mental problems associated with Schwartz were common to this whole group of writers; and they all continued to write throughout their difficulties. Schwartz's work may not have improved but his decline may not have been inevitable. His neurosis was probably only a certain amount more advanced than Berryman's or Lowell's.

Berryman's Dream Songs for Schwartz are the portrait of a man going slowly insane and his talent being wasted; but this might be too subjective a view, trapped in the mood of the time. In retrospect it may be that Schwartz's work simply went out of fashion. The picture of decline, however, is artistically more arresting, and this is not to accuse Berryman of exaggerating the decline or his own grief. Schwartz's final years may have been or seemed just as dramatic as he describes them; when so many poets were dying at the time of writing *The Dream Songs*, the loss of Schwartz may have led Berryman to write definitively about tragic death, to envision Schwartz as the final legendary figure of elegiac poetry, as if in hope that the subject would come to an end.

I would argue that in this period of American poetry, some of the assumed rules for writing about death had changed with the appearance of *Life Studies*, *The Lost Son*, Jarrell's war poems, much of Schwartz's oeuvre and *The Dream Songs* among other works. In the twentieth century, death has taken on new cultural associations. The realization of this in poetry had already occurred some years previously, but with the Middle Generation poets the shadow of apocalypse that had

threatened the Modernists had been overtaken by a more immediate tragedy, which involved all the poets I have mentioned more directly, as their group diminished relentlessly through the sixties and seventies. Berryman, as the apparent survivor, adds tragic height to his elegies by suggesting that their subjects were not given the chance to pursue fully their insights before being cut down by illness, insanity or suicide. When one reads *The Dream Songs* it is difficult not to be convinced of this fear. For the so-called Middle Generation the pressure to achieve in the wake of the Modernists seems to have been a major factor in contributing to their collective self-destruction; and their sense of being at the end of things, an ominous chapter in history, makes their sense of elegy as a wide ranging tool of emotional comprehension noticeably more acute.

Chapter Three
The Development of Berryman's Elegiac Voice

Having so far explored the elements of the elegiac in poetry that may be compared with Berryman's, I now want to trace the development of his own voice towards an apparent culmination in *The Dream Songs*, and the presence of an elegiac quality in his earlier work, the majority of which is not necessarily regarded as mourning poetry. It ought to be remembered, however, that one of his first attempts at publication was with his 'Elegy: Hart Crane' which, Haffenden notes, was rejected with the criticism typical of his early work:

> Berryman shortly sent 'Elegy: Hart Crane' to the *New Republic*, where Malcolm Cowley responded: 'Your poem to Hart Crane is a fine piece of workmanship in which the thought is less distinguished than the imagery.'[1]

The poem does indeed rest primarily on a simple conceit of comparative states; that is, to reflect that when alive, Crane was the poet of the city, the train, and the bridge, but now dead, he is the poet of the sea bed (Crane died by jumping from a ship):

> As had the ear heard loud and long on land
> Train thunder, throated cry and the great bell
> Of evening earth, there now concern with sand
> Whispers of purple anemone and shell.[2]

The poem is, like much of the work in his early collections, *Poems* and *The Dispossessed*, subdued in tone and traditional in form. 'Elegy: Hart Crane' is in elegiac stanzas; strictness of meter and rhyme are subverted in only two or three instances. Moreover, its mourning is without the aggression to be found in Berryman's later work, although it is also without the pastoral guise or the religious questioning perhaps expected of a traditionally elegiac poem. An elegy's depiction of loss is displaced here by a presentation of the mourned poet in a transcendent state, continuing his craft beyond his own death, having changed his subject matter from the

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1 *Life*, p. 73.
2 John Berryman, 'Elegy: Hart Crane', *Columbia Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), p. 12.

city to the sea. The poem perhaps suggests a mourner's refusal to accept the death in question, by presenting the dead in a fantastical state; but in this view fantasy gets the better of intellectual rigour, since we are urged to mourn, and not to disturb, the poet hitherto imaged as (spiritually at least) still alive:

> O mourn the legend left here in the first
> Full sun, fragments of light to tell the day.
> Tread slowly, softly silence while the dust
> Whirls up the sky and walls the sound away.
>
> Cantlets of speech: beyond the reach of light
> Beyond all architecture, the last ledge,
> He is obscure in ocean in the night—
> Monstrous and still, brooding above the bridge.

The inconsistency of the poem's mourning seems to arise from the need to sustain its ocean metaphor, which becomes an artifice more conspicuous than its sense of grief. Although the poem is considerate to its subject in its incorporation of Crane's life and work into its imagery ('Beyond all architecture, the last ledge [...] brooding above the bridge'), this comes to seem part of the poem's insubstantiality, that it appears to use Crane to develop its own atmosphere, rather than to mourn Crane by exemplifying those things by which we know him.

While much of his early poetry may certainly be considered more craft than art, his willingness to compose an elegy at this early stage suggests that even before finding his mature voice Berryman was becoming familiar with the sense of poetry as an address to the dead. My contention is that the tenets of his poetics of mourning may be traced, to a certain extent, within much of his early work, particularly in the issue of how the poet presents himself, or a version of self, within a poem, particularly when addressing or discussing an external figure or matter. The inherent inwardness of elegy may be implicit in Berryman's earlier introspection, even if his personality as a poet was yet to take its full form. As a young poet, it may be inevitable that his work would take a solipsistic cast, tend to look inward even when looking out, but what one may note is how such prepossession with self develops into the complexities of the 'I', questioning where the speaker's empathy lies, in the voice of Henry. I will be tracing a movement within the frame of *The Dispossessed* towards an experimentation

in persona that is suggestive of *The Dream Songs*, continuing in the assorted smaller collections up to and including *Berryman's Sonnets*, before the more pronounced experimentation of *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* which signals the real progression in Berryman's thinking about the role of the poetic self, a crystallization of ideas that anticipates his elegiac mode in the sense of turning the intimately personal into a paradox of selfish empathy.

The Dispossessed.

Berryman's progression towards *The Dream Songs* is notable for its haphazardness, involving wholesale changes of style and varying critical receptions. It is accepted by many, Berryman included, that much of his early work belies his reputation as a figure of post-war poetry. Where contemporaries shone at an early age and often proceeded to lose the bloom of their youthful talent, Berryman found his voice at a late stage. His technical achievements early on are perhaps flawed by the too obvious derivations from admired predecessors, the inability to give a subject the necessary clarity, and a vibrancy of diction against which this can strain effectively. *The Dispossessed*, moderately praised at the time of publication, now seems destined to be considered an apprenticeship. (Randall Jarrell commented: 'Doing things in a style all its own sometimes seems the primary object of the poem, and its subject gets a rather spasmodic and fragmentary treatment').[3] It is perhaps the case that in the harsh light of *The Dream Songs*, this early collection seems to have faded somewhat in comparison. The repeated criticism, which must have rung in Berryman's ears at the time of publication but is still true today, is that the verse of this collection is a demonstration of how style can suffocate content. At this stage in his career he was yet to find a way of ordering experience into a distinctive poetic form.

In the opening poem of the collection, 'Winter Landscape,' he employs a relatively common tactic of transferring a painting into verse, in this case Breughel's 'Hunters in the Snow,' the same painting later used by William Carlos Williams for

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[3] Randall Jarrell, 'Verse Chronicle', *The Nation* (17 July 1948), 80-81 (p. 81).

'Pictures from Breughel':

> The three men coming down the winter hill
> In brown, with tall poles and a pack of hounds
> At heel, through the arrangement of the trees,
> Past the five figures at the burning straw,
> Returning cold and silent to their town,
>
> Returning to the drifted snow, the rink
> Lively with children, to the older men,
> The long companions they can never reach,
> The blue light, men with ladders, by the church
> The sledge and shadow in the twilit street,
>
> Are not aware that in the sandy time
> To come, the evil waste of history
> Outstretched, they will be seen upon the brow
> Of that same hill.

The stasis of a painting is a useful base for the rhetoric of time and consequence with which the poem deals. It is a snapshot which eradicates context, but reminds the viewer that this is an eradication chosen by the artist. The excerpt quoted above covers the first half of the poem, and Berryman achieves the stillness of a painting by delaying the verb which governs the 'three men' for ten lines ('are not aware'), and filling the void with simple descriptions, linked by prepositions, 'through [...] | Past [...] | with [...] | by', mimicking the painter's visualization of his scene. The flatness of the poem reminds the reader of the painter's illusion of three dimensions, the lifelessness of winter echoing the lifelessness of the painting and the poem: the characters in the scene are frozen. The painting does not come to life, and the poet reminds us of this; he remains aware of the scene as artificial, and comments on the 'arrangement of the trees.' The painter is God, he can place the trees wherever he wants. The characters do not move, they are in a world of present participles: 'coming down the winter hill [...] | Returning cold and silent [...] | Returning to the drifted snow'. The poet knows they can come but never arrive, to join the 'long companions they can never reach.' It might be argued that the stillness of the painting articulates a modernist metaphor: it is a scene of loneliness and desolation, of the destruction of human contact, the calm before the storm of modern civilization. There is a hint of the modern period in the mention of men 'in brown' which suggests Hitler's Brownshirts,

who are 'cold and silent' (this reference seems to have more weight in the context of the collection as a whole, wherein World War Two is a recurrent scene). The scene-setting is interrupted in the third stanza by the poet's rhetorical interjection of his own omniscience, his knowledge of a spatial, temporal world outside the painting and the poem, commenting that the figures in the painting are 'not aware that in the sandy time | To come, the evil waste of history,' they will remain where they are forever, while the figures outside the painting will not have been saved from the stream of time; 'their company | Will have been irrevocably lost.' The poem and the painting preserves them but not their undepicted companions. This is suggestive also of a stand against Nazi attempts to control history, to control the existence of entire peoples. The poet is determined to keep a record. The painting is a piece of evidence: in the fourth stanza the men themselves are '*witnessed* by birds' (my emphasis); the configuration of them with the rest of the painting will tell the viewer something about the life of those depicted. The poem rises in the centre with the forceful line about 'the evil waste of history outstretched.' The figures represent a lost innocence; they are portrayed, perhaps wistfully, outside the continuity of history and the decline of man. It is a poem of its time, and displays clearly the influence of Auden and Yeats in its view of the heroism of the ancient individual, the wreckage of history, the pitfalls of modernity. This derivativeness seems to obscure the technical skill of the poet. Joel Conarroe compares the poem, which he regards as 'ponderous and sententious', with William Carlos Williams' 'Pictures From Breughel': 'Where Williams renders, however, Berryman states, giving oracular significance to the discovery that life is short, art long.'[4]

Berryman's indebtedness to other poets is betrayed throughout the collection, for instance in the poem '1 September 1939,' whose title gives the reader a hint of its Audenesque tone.

> The first, scattering rain on the Polish cities.
> That afternoon a man squat' on the shore
> Tearing a square of shining cellophane.

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[4] Joel Conarroe, *John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977). p. 27.

Some easily, some in evident torment tore,
Some for a time resisted, and then burst [...]

Children were sent from London in the morning
But not the sound of children reached his ear.
He found a mangled feather by the lake,
Lost in the destructive sand this year
Like feathery independence, hope. His shadow
Lay on the sand before him, under the lake
As under the ruined library our learning.
The children play in the waves until they break.

The Bear crept under the Eagle's wing and lay
snarling; the other animals showed fear,
Europe darkened its cities. The man wept,
Considering the light which had been there, [...]
The cellophane, dismembered, blew away.
The animals ran, the Eagle soared and dropt.

The poet's struggle with form has yet to be resolved, and here the iambic meter compresses meaning in an unproductive way, not engendering mystery but partially confusing the reader. The unsettled rhythm of the first stanza obscures its philosophic thrust; by tethering the subject to a somewhat strangled pentameter, the poet compromises meaning. The sentiment seems to lie with the image of a man 'tearing a square of shining cellophane.' The relative ease or difficulty with which he tears each respective piece perhaps relates to the decimation of European cities in World War Two: 'Some easily, some in evident torment tore.' The strangeness of this image seems insufficiently exploited in the poem, as it stands out against the more commonplace vision of evacuated children mentioned in the second stanza. Berryman mixes the allegorical and the literal, giving the poem an uncertain emotional stance. A 'mangled feather' is presented as a symbol of the peaceful victims of aggression, 'like feathery independence, hope,' and Hitler's regressive influence on Europe is likened to a 'shadow' cast 'on the sand' before him, which reminds one of Auden's mention of the 'darkened lands of the earth' in his own poem for the same date; yet a more powerful effect is achieved with the simple but ominous 'Europe darkened its cities'. The 'ruined library' is presented as the symbol of 'our learning', which totalitarianism threatens to crush, which seems a too obvious metaphor. The Russo-German pact is symbolized with the quasi-Yeatsian phrase 'The Bear crept under the Eagle's wing.'

The poem collects together strange and distracting metaphors, but struggles to put them to purposeful use and is memorable, as Jarrell says, for its rhythm (which becomes restrictive) rather than for its subject matter. Such a poem usefully demonstrates the movement from here to *The Dream Songs*; Berryman seems to attempt some diversity within the scope of a particular subject, and the result is an uneven shifting between the prosaic and the symbolic, whereas in *The Dream Songs* diversity is the norm at the levels of subject, form, and diction. More specifically, where the early poetry attempts at times to deal with its elegiac qualities (in this instance in the abstraction of an unnamed man weeping for the darkness over Europe, 'Considering the light which had been there'), *The Dream Songs*, as I will later argue, starts out with elegy as a first principle.

The poems of *The Dispossessed* may also be distinguished from *The Dream Songs* in that the former lacks the empathy as well as brusqueness of the latter. Berryman is sometimes guilty here of an unnecessary aloofness in tone, which is displayed in the often unsympathetic treatment of other people. In 'The Statue' the poet identifies with the personified statue, in the midst of the ignorance and indifference of the human beings that surround it, as in the first stanza:

> The statue, tolerant through years of weather,
> Spares the untidy Sunday throng its look,
> Spares shopgirls knowledge of the fatal pallor
> Under their evening colour,
> Spares homosexuals, the crippled, the alone,
> Extravagant perception of their failure;
> Looks only, cynical, across them all
> To the delightful Avenue and its lights.

Like the statue the poet claims to see and not be seen. His picture of the general public is not encouraging, but this reflects badly on the poet, who appears self-absorbed and misanthropic. The 'tolerant' statue will not look at the 'untidy Sunday throng,' who are neatly emblematic of a loss of faith. While the statue spares them his gaze, it is the poet who sees the flawed individuals surrounding it, implying condemnation of 'shopgirls' who are unaware of their own mortality, 'the fatal pallor | Under their evening colour.' The poet seems determined to make everyone share this pessimism.

If, however, the concept of the statue was intended as a displacement of his own misanthropy it seems to backfire since all it is imbued with is indifference. In fact, Berryman's treatment of perception and identification wavers here, in a way that his later elegiac identifications do not; his motive for such treatment seems to have developed along with the poem. The statue's 'Extravagant perception of their failure' is soon distanced from the narrator's view, when the second stanza specifies 'Where I sit, near the entrance to the park'. His tone is better suited to the concise imagery in the second stanza of the homeless men who sleep in the park, where cynicism is mixed with compassion, albeit still hampered by the poet's compulsion to over-abbreviate, for example:

> a hundred men have lain till morning
> And the preservative darkness waning,
> Waking to want, to the day before, desire
> For the ultimate good, Respect, to hunger waking.

By reducing their situation to a couple of lines, the poet tries to isolate a powerful picture but is in danger of mixing scene-setting with polemic in ways that obscure the moral tone of the poem. He presumes to know the feelings of his subjects, which can distract the reader from the poem's observational sharpness. The sixth line of this stanza is obtrusive in its ambiguity amid a passage of relatively prosaic language. In likening the waking men to 'the statue ruined but without its eyes,' the poet alludes to a moral diversity which he fails to exploit. The poet could be saying that the men are without the statue's eyes, without its detached vision of human life around it, or that the statue, like the men, is ruined but still has an awareness of this ruination; the ambiguity lies in the poet's incongruous use of 'but', something at which he would become far more adept later in his career. A statue without its eyes would normally be considered ruined, but the dissonance of the line holds up the reader, refers back to the suggestion of the statue's human awareness, its 'eyes' perhaps saved from ruin, and implies a greater humanity in the statue than the people it observes. The happiness of lovers in the park is assumed to be transient, it 'runs out like water.' The fact that 'they have not seen the statue' is given significance by placing the phrase at the end of

the stanza, but it is concordant with the tone of disdain for ignorance; the lovers' ignorance of the statue is intended to demonstrate their ignorance of the work of time and the discrepancy between the eternal statue which has never lived and the people in the park who are bound to die. The sixth stanza continues in this vein and seems to express on the part of the poet a feeling of revulsion at the physicality of love.

> The lovers pass. Not one of them can know
> Or care which Humboldt is immortalized.
> If they glance up, they glance in passing,
> An idle outcome of that pacing
> That never stops, and proves them animal;
> These thighs breasts pointed eyes are not their choosing,
> But blind insignia by which are known
> Season, excitement, loosed upon this city.

The lovers' lack of interest in the subject of the statue is regarded by the poet as proof of their 'animal' nature. Like 'Winter Landscape', the poem exhibits Berryman's concerns with the passage of time, consequence and immortality, in a spiritual and artistic sense. The fifth stanza, especially, reflects on the fate of the statue:

> Since graduating from its years of flesh
> The name has faded in the public mind
> Or doubled: which is this? the elder? the younger?
> The statesman or the traveller?
> Who first died or who edited his works,
> The lonely brother bound to remain longer
> By a quarter-century than the first-born
> Of that illustrious and lost family?

In realizing the transience of fame even for a public figure immortalized in stone, Berryman brings into question any wish for identification with the statue, whose 'name has faded in the public mind' or as he sarcastically suggests, 'doubled'; that is, the statue's title is no longer synonymous with its subject, it has become just a name. Berryman jocularly remarked on the unglamorousness of his real name, John Smith, and along with his apparent resentment at being renamed under his stepfather, this may have contributed to his burgeoning sense of how fame turns. The statue is indeed immortal, its name lives on after the death of the man, but its immortality is meaningless. It is worth noting Berryman's later reflection on the same issue, in Dream Song 133, which begins: 'As he grew famous—ah but what is fame?— | he

lost his old obsession with his name.'

In 'Farewell to Miles', the poem achieves more by avoiding the inwardness of 'The Statue.' The poem has the impression of a memorial, but it is actually an account of a leaving party for Lieutenant Theodore Miles from Wayne University. The use of 'farewell' is literal but the opening line, 'We are to tell one man tonight good-bye', has the euphemistic gentleness of a wake, an elegy. This line is rather ironic in the light of Berryman's extreme plurality of voice in his later elegies. As in 'The Statue,' the poet is dismayed by the inferior beings that surround him, struggling to find 'in thirteen bodies one appropriate mind.' Syntax becomes uncomfortably squashed in Berryman's efforts to dominate pentameter, as in the line 'Laughing like ancestor. Hard, hard to find,' whose first phrase is abbreviated to telegram length, and whose repetition of 'hard' seems to over-balance metrical feet. This willingness to contort grammar for the sake of a regular rhythm prefigures Berryman's later experimentalism, but here the contortion is still straining against a traditional form and even diction, with the effect that rather than forcing new meaning out of unusual constructions, obscurity of meaning is lost in the forcefulness of rhythm. The incompleteness of voice here ultimately vitiates any moral superiority the poem projects for its narrator, because his inability to express himself naturally ought to deny him the right to question the expression of the others he has joined to say farewell. Berryman seems to divert solipsism in his later work not only through a more natural empathy but by compromising the 'I'. The egotism displayed in *The Dream Songs* is too complex to be so easily undermined, since the nature of its voice brings ego itself into question. One might contend that in these earlier works Berryman is simply using a more fixed persona, which he may disclaim as he disclaims Henry, but this seems generous, and in fact Berryman was initially disdainful of the text-centring of the New Critics and the impersonality of Eliot. Kathe Davis highlights this early biographical stance:

> The self as persona was an idea Berryman would develop. He had figured out early that, notwithstanding local dogma, biography constituted an indispensable context for poetry [...] Yeats was his hero, as all his early reviewers noticed: not Yeats as High Modernist — 'To hell, by the way, with

> the mask,' Berryman declared at twenty-two and the height of his hero worship [...] — but Yeats as the poet of Unity of Being, a counterforce to the 'then crushing weight of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot'.[5]

Davis goes on to suggest that the naked, first person voice of Berryman's late work, *Love & Fame*, is as much a 'construct' as Henry, which I will discuss in the final chapter of this study, but she does not bring *The Dispossessed* into the discussion. Berryman's use of uncertain personae is nevertheless a skill to be noted at this stage, although its effects are less fundamental, and often seem more concerned with lyricism than psyche. The second stanza of 'Farewell To Miles' may illustrate:

> Who knows where who will be,
> Under what master, in what company
> When what we hope for has not come again.

The lines achieve a lyrical mournfulness using a series of interrogations concluded by an almost expected disappointment. The wonder and uncertainty about the future, mingled with a resigned lack of hope, is further expressed by the poem's image of the dog wandering aimlessly among the professors.

His later thematic concerns are in evidence here, though they are rather subdued, and in this instance projected onto another figure, that of Miles. The tone is sardonic, and suggestive of *The Dream Songs*, as in the third stanza:

> The urbane and bitter Miles at Harvard may
> Discover in time an acid holiday
> And let the long wound of his birth lie still.

The mention of the 'long wound of his birth' is a precursor of Henry's metaphorical birth, as a literary creation, and the pain it entails, but the phrase here is merely cryptic, where in the later work it is quite scrambled, so that the 'birth' we perceive in Dream Song 1 is rooted in its symbolism, mentioned as a 'departure.' The poet moves on from this quietly mysterious line to a more problematic one that attempts to summarize and conclude, but in the end seems overly sententious, and lacks a verb: 'Possibilities, dreams, in a crowded room.' Within the context of the poem, these criticisms are abated by the injections of deprecating humour, as when the poet asks

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[5] Kathe Davis, 'The Li(v)es of the Poet', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 30 (1984), 46-68 (p. 46).

the man who 'does any peace know' to 'arise and come | Out of the highballs, past the dog, forward.' Berryman's taste for gentle satire (which is not so gentle in *The Dream Songs)* is put to good use here and covers other errors that might have been more glaring. For example, the final stanza attempts to give itself greater import with its use of heavily reversed feet: 'Possibilities [...] Fantasy.' The only sense we get from this emphasis however is of self-importance. This poem approaches a mood of its own but fails through aloofness and a forced serenity, seemingly unsuited to the scene.

The problems to be found in 'Farewell to Miles' re-occur in Berryman's early ambitious poem, 'A Point of Age.' The poem hints at grandeur with its three sections and the portent of the opening line, 'At twenty-five a man is on his way,' which can be partly explained by the fact that he wrote this when he was twenty-six. It is full of proverbial announcements ('Images are the mind's life, and they change.'), which seem all the more ponderous when the rest of the piece seems intent on understatement. The second stanza is strongly reminiscent of Robert Frost's 'Acquainted With the Night', but Berryman doesn't capture the atmosphere of his apparent model. The overriding preoccupation for the poet at this time is his age and his position in the world. These are certainly appropriate thoughts for the poetry of an academic in his mid-twenties, but the young artist's rationale about the human condition is once again filtered through a seemingly presumptuous pessimism: 'Where later, leaves, untidy lives will fall.' He puts leaves into a stanza concerned with the city, the clockface, 'the autos'. With this contrast he is perhaps suggesting that untidy lives are concurrent with the corruption of nature; the confusion of human life is perhaps the 'fog [...] enveloping the bridges.' But his language is too condensed by form to be either prosaic in its clarity or free-flowing in its imagery. One of the more oblique lines of 'A Point Of Age' conceals a noteworthy irony: 'slut | Solace and drink drown the degraded eye.' The meaning of this seems to be that 'friends I had' have used drink and debauchery as an excuse for or escape from their failure to achieve their ambitions or cope with their own knowledge, and this is evidence of their moral bankruptcy. The irony of this is that Berryman himself was later in life

guilty of much the same failures. It seems a further irony that this observation is couched in language which partly anticipates that of *The Dream Songs*, if less sustained in its invention. The linguistic acrobatics that are so impressive in *The Dream Songs* are here albeit in embryonic form, but they lack the diversity of subject, image, and humour. The poems here are carefully constructed but they are obviously so. Berryman is often too eager to end with a bang rather than a whimper, as in the end of the first part of 'A Point of Age':

> Late it is late, and it is time to start.
> Sanction the civic woe, deal with you dear,
> Convince the stranger: none of us is well.
> We must travel in the direction of our fear.

The final line here sounds too much like Auden's 'We must love one another or die.'[6] It is something of a call to arms for young liberals, including the already familiar (for the young Berryman) areas of concern with time, urgency, the need to act in the face of impending doom. There is also a possible post-Freudian influence in the idea that 'none of us is well', suggesting that every brain is flawed by childhood dysfunction. Such a generalization may arise from the relevance of the condition in Berryman's case. He says that 'it is time to start', but does not specify what. His intention to say something important seems strangled by the lack of anything actually to say. In the second section of 'A Point of Age' he deals with the heroism of the past and attempts to come to terms with his own place in history by summoning up heroes of his own ancestry. Berryman was apparently descended from civil war soldier Ethan Allen, and in a very dense passage compares Allen's age with his own, but his conclusions are unclear. He also invokes his great-grandfather, Robert Glenn Shaver, also a civil war veteran. In the central lines of this passage Berryman cryptically betrays his own ambivalence towards his father. The rebel father Allen teaches 'disobedience to the son | Who neither obeys nor can disobey One | No longer.' In a telling sentence he bids Allen to 'Speak from the forest and declare my blood | Dishonour, *a trick a*

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[6] W. H. Auden, 'September 1, 1939' *Selected Poems*, ed by Edward Mendelsohn (London: Faber & Faber, p. 88.

mockery my name' (my emphasis). As mentioned earlier in reference to 'The Statue', Berryman's interest in heredity, fame and immortality centre around the life of one's name. His renaming is denounced here as the dishonour of his blood. He can neither obey nor disobey One (his real father) because he is not there to react to in any way. He is therefore unable to address any male figure other than as a father figure or a betrayal of that apparent role. In a typically Yeatsian way, Berryman might be hinting at the need to escape from these psychological difficulties into the world of mythology, symbolized for him by the heroism of his great-grandfather:

> You, Shaver, other shade, rebel again,
> Great-grandfather, attest my hopeless need
> Amongst the chromium luxury of our age.

He later talks about someone 'who was lifted before he could die', which could represent Jesus or some other mythical figure, which would accord with the 'Animal-and Hero' reference which follows ('Animal-and-Hero, where you lounge the air | Is the air of summer, smooth and masculine | As skin over a muscle; but the day | Darkens, and it is time to move away.'). The poem is packed with apocalyptic rhetoric ('Man in the cradle, old, | Rocks on the fiery earth, smoke is his fame'; 'before it is too late | I make my testament'; 'All that someone has wished or understood | Is fuel to the holocaust he lives.'), but despite this seems to lack a moral core. Much of the poem is spent trying to enunciate famous last words. The sense of impending destruction and chaos is understandable in 1940, but the expression of this sense is somehow insincere, and inconclusive.

Berryman's sense of thematic proportion is a contiguous problem in *The Dispossessed*. The poems address weighty topics with an earnest respect but consequently lack commentary of any incision, and it is ironically the seemingly inconsequential scenes as in 'Farewell to Miles' that arouse the poet's perceptiveness. As Michael Hoffman commented, he is 'too serious, and not serious enough.'[7] In 'Boston Common (A Meditation upon the Hero)', he attempts to evoke grandeur from

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[7] Michael Hoffman, 'Single Combat,' *TLS* , 4540 (6-12 April 1990), 363-365 (p. 364).

a worthy subject (the same subject of Lowell's 'For the Union Dead', Robert Gould Shaw and the first black regiment of the Civil War) but he tends towards the same ideas dealt with in 'The Statue' and 'Winter Landscape'. He deals with heroism and aggression through the image of a tramp sleeping under Shaw's statue, but fails to follow up the issues that Lowell explored, and instead moves into an over-generalized dissection of what constitutes a hero, in and out of war. He wonders if the tramp was at one time more heroic than he now seems:

> Passive he seems to lie,
> The last straw of contemporary thought,
> In shapeless failure; but may be this man
> Before he came here, or he comes to die,
> Blazing with force or fortitude
> Superb of civil soul may stand or may
> After young Shaw within that crucible have stood.

Berryman seems to suggest that the heroism of the Civil War survives in the figure of 'the possible hero'(l.24), and again uses the statue as an image of timelessness, but one that is questioned by modern-day indifference ('Who now cares how? here they are in their prime,'(l.17)). In stanza viii he seems to suggest a hypocritical desire by modern man to be part of the same immortality that is represented by bronze statues: 'Question | Your official heroes in a magazine[...] | Man and animal | Sit for their photographs to Fame, and dream | Barbershop hours.' His intended rhetorical force is marred, however, by the intrusive obscurity of his image-making, and the discursiveness with which he approaches the subject of heroism. While isolated lines and passages hint at the argument he wants to make, Berryman seems to overload his observation with abstract interventions that drag the subject around unnecessarily, as in stanza vii:

> For ceremony, in the West, in the East,
> the pierced sky, iced air, and the rent of cloud
> As, moving to his task at dawn, who'd been
> Hobbledehoy of the cafeteria life
> Swung like a hobby in the blue and rode
> The shining body of his choice
> To the eye and time of his bombardier;—
> Stiffened in the racket, and relaxed beyond noise.

Whereas Lowell achieves more by allowing the conflicting scenes of Shaw and his men and the modern Boston to confront each other, Berryman attempts to synthesize the historical and the modern into an opinion about both before the reader, but the complexity of his prosody means that it fails to be either a memorial to Shaw's regiment or, as its subtitle says, 'A Meditation upon The Hero.' It may be that by accelerating this complexity to an unfeasible speed, Berryman arrived at something of the language of *The Dream Songs*; and while his discursiveness here is detrimental, in his later work, it allows for great leaps of meaning or matter that the structure and purpose of the poetry could cope with. The poems in *The Dispossessed* that still work are generally those that do not deviate from the smallness of their original conceit.

For example, 'The Possessed' achieves its effects by combining the concentrated atmosphere of a gothic horror with the personal intensity that Berryman alluded to at this point and which comes through despite the obliqueness of much of the collection's language. Certain passages here involve a contemplation of suicide almost as a duty of atonement:

> Think on your sins with all intensity
> The men are on the stair, they will not wait.
> There is a paper-knife to penetrate
> Heart & guilt together. Do it quickly.

This suggests that the narrator is a bad conscience reminding the subject to 'think on your sins with all intensity', before he can punish himself with 'a paper-knife' — a pun on the poet's profession; he could 'do it' with words, on paper. The urgency of the narrator's ritualistic instructions with their genre references ('Until the sun sets you are safe') builds on an ironic metaphor that unites supernatural and personal perspectives on death, a connection given full force in aspects of the Dream Song elegies, particularly the presentation of Delmore Schwartz as a ghostly figure, ('the new ghost | haunting Henry most'(146)) which will be discussed later at greater length. A ghost traditionally represents an unhappy, restless soul, and this belief seems to predicate much of Berryman's presentation of persona, primarily his father's and his own. In this view, the underlying thrust of all this eeriness seems to lie in the

early line, 'This is what you inherited'; Berryman has already begun to fashion a poetics based upon a legacy of tragic loss.

Images of the father as a haunting, debilitating figure persist in 'World's Fair'. While waiting at a fairground for his date to arrive, the young poet thinks about the death of his father:

> Suddenly in torn images I trace
> The inexhaustible ability of a man
> Loved once, long lost, still to prevent my peace,
> Still to suggest my dreams and starve horizon.

His 'horizon', his future, is starved, arrested by his inability to escape the memory of his death; this prevents his progress as a person, since he is tethered to a childhood memory and therefore to his childhood. J. M. Linebarger gives a useful explication for the reference to Middleton's 'A Chaste Mayd in Cheap Side':

> The reference combines, in a complicated way, love lost with the loss of Berryman's father. In Middleton's play, Tim, a young Cambridge student, writes a letter to his parents, expressing his great love for both of them. In Berryman's poem, the memory of his father obsesses the poet but the grave, like Middleton's, is in a 'forgotten place' because the poet had never returned to see it.[8]

Literary reference in Berryman's work is pertinent in one way or another to an aspect of his psychology as a poet; he was clearly very thorough about such things, and perhaps wanted to create puzzles for those interested in further investigation. 'World's Fair' has a scene-setting first stanza, slipping into reverie in the second which contains the philosophical core of the poem, and returning in the third to the normality of time and place set out in the beginning. There are problems in the final stanza with the misanthropy found in 'The Statue':

> Where tireless couples mount still, hand in hand,
> For the complex drug of catapult and fall
> To blot out the life they cannot understand
> And never will forgive [...]

The poet continues implicitly to place himself outside the intoxication of the 'complex drug' or the vagaries of the life that 'they cannot understand'. Berryman's later work

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[8] J. M. Linebarger, *John Berryman* (New York: Twayne, 1974), p. 47.

turns this stance around by showing us the inner mind of a character overcome by the complex drug and at a loss to understand life. 'At Chinese Checkers' achieves something of this later intention in presenting a wandering mind in the context of a concrete situation, that of playing the board game with children. The speaker thinks variously of his own childhood ('The fox-like child I was or assume I was.') and of Delmore Schwartz:

> Deep in the unfriendly city Delmore lies
> And cannot sleep, and cannot bring his mind
> And cannot bring those marvellous faculties
> To bear upon the day sunk down behind [...]

Berryman is talking here of Schwartz having already lost his artistic gift, 'the eloquent mouth relaxed and dumb, | Trouble and mist in the apathetic head.' As shall also be discussed later in this study, Berryman is already expressing in his work an awareness of the incipient decline of Schwartz's career. Interestingly the poem uses a similar framework of symbolism and heightened lyricism to that used in 'Elegy: Hart Crane':

> The gold is lost. But issued from the tomb,
> Delmore's magical tongue. What the sea told
> Will keep these violent strangers from our room.

Delmore's voice, his 'magical tongue' is already described ominously as issuing 'from the tomb', many years before his death. The combination in this work of the concrete situation ('deep in the unfriendly city') with the almost surreal imagery quoted above prefigures Berryman's later treatment of Schwartz as a muse quite fundamentally, in that his elegies to Schwartz heighten further still both approaches and then bring them into harsh conflict as a specific poetic device; in *The Dream Songs* he brings about a linguistic facsimile of the manic swings experienced in loss and grief, alternately imaging the poet Schwartz as a force of nature, as if attempting to pastoralize his memory ('High in the summer branches the poet sang'(147), and as a tragically human individual ('He fell on the floor | outside a cheap hotel-room'(151)). While the poetry here has not yet made the leap to the stylistic radicalism of *The Dream Songs*, the essentials of the poet's desire to memorialize with both lyricism and aggression can, with hindsight, be detected at an embryonic

stage in aspects of this early collection.

Another specific instance where the qualities of Berryman's later work can be seen quite clearly is in 'Canto Amor', which is more explicitly connected to Dream Song language, as given away in the opening line, 'Dream in a dream the heavy soul somewhere'. The poem is full of inverted syntax, as if it had been hurriedly translated into English:

> If (Unknown Majesty) I not confess
> praise for the wrack the rock the live sailor
> under the blue sea,—yet I may You bless
> always for hér, in fear & joy for hér
> whose gesture summons ever when I grieve
> me back and is my mage and minister.

Its use of *terza rima* may also suggest that the sense of a translation intends Dante to be compared, as does the yearning expression for an idealized Beatrice figure:

> Pale as a star lost in returning skies,
> more beautiful than midnight stars more frail
> she moved towards me like chords, a sacrifice

The tightness of the form does not obviously constrain as in the other poems; the rhyme scheme is softened by slant rhyme and assonance. Its rigidity as a scheme carrying language of a generally modern idiom does not so adversely affect the tone, as might be argued in the apparent struggles with pentameter of 'The Statue', for instance. Within the context of love expressed for an unspecified woman, it takes in a diverse range of often bizarre images, such as 'the live sailor | under the blue sea', the 'griffin' which 'sighs off in the orphic air'; the poet tells God he may not worship the sailor but thanks him 'always for her'. The words flow in an effervescence perhaps intended to represent the irrationality of obsessive love, sometimes running together in unusual compounds: 'Heartmating hesitating unafraid', elsewhere the poet runs together strings of florid abstracts: 'flowering power comeliness kindness grace.' The mention of a 'maiden Queen' and the Latin title are part of the general flavour of the poem which is perhaps Elizabethan in its amorousness:

> Marriage is the second music, and thereof

> We hear what we can bear, faithful & mild.
>
> Therefore the streaming torches in the grove
> through dark or bright, swiftly & now more near
> cherish a festival of anxious love.

The first line quoted has a clear echo of *Twelfth Night*, almost a qualification of the quotation to which it alludes, hinting that with marriage, one cannot simply 'play on', rather 'we hear what we can bear'; while the 'streaming torches in the grove' and 'a festival of anxious love' perhaps invoke *As You Like It* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The invocations of Shakespeare and renaissance lyric may be connected in the pattern of Berryman's poetry to the subsequent work that exhibits similar influence, especially *Berryman's Sonnets*, which I shall discuss later in this chapter; incidentally, Peter Stitt, in his interview with Berryman, remarked on the evidence of this influence even in *The Dream Songs*:

> INTERVIEWER: [...] One of the dream songs, one of those written to the memory of Delmore Schwartz, [...] These lines:
> Henry's mind grew blacker the more he thought.
> He looked onto the world like the act of an aged whore.
> Delmore, Delmore.
> He flung to pieces and they hit the floor.
> That sounds very Shakespearian to me.
> BERRYMAN: That sounds like *Troilus and Cressida* doesn't it? One of my very favourite plays. I would call that Shakespearian. Not to praise it though, only in description.[9]

More obvious connections still to the work Berryman's reputation would ultimately rest upon can be found in 'The Nervous Songs', an isolated section at the end of *The Dispossessed*. These poems in Dream Song stanzas do not have the lyricism of 'Canto Amor' but retain the linguistic inventiveness, and for the first time Berryman presents us with the specific viewpoints of characters, who are not observed by the omniscient poet, but speak to us directly, in convincing if unusual voices. The tone instantly loses the artifice of the earlier poems (*The Dispossessed* is arranged more or less in chronological order as Berryman's preface to the collection testifies: 'With exceptions for a thematic reason, affecting Section One, the poems stand in

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[9] Peter Stitt, *Paris Review*, p. 182.

what was roughly their order of writing.'[10]); also the mangling of syntax is more adventurous, playful, less obviously linked to meter, as in 'Young Woman's Song':

> The round and smooth, my body in my bath,
> If someone else would like it too. — I did,
> I wanted T. to think 'How interesting'
> Although I hate his voice and face, hate both.
> I hate this something like a bobbing cork
> Not going. I want something to hang to. —
>
> A fierce wind roaring high up in the bare
> Branches of trees, — I suppose it was lust
> But it was holy and awful. All day I thought
> I am a bobbing cork, irresponsible child
> Loose on the waters. — What have you done at last?
> A little work, a little vague chat.
>
> I want that £3.10 hat terribly.—
> What I am looking for (*I am*) may be
> Happening in the gaps of what I know.
> The full moon does go with you as yóu go.
> where am I going? I am not afraid..
> Only I would be lifted lost in the flood.(*CP*, p.49)

The 'Young Woman' of this song seems to see herself from outside her own body, 'something like a bobbing cork.' There are hints of Molly Bloom's soliloquy in lines like 'I want that £3.10 hat terribly.' The 'Song of the Demented Priest', in dealing with a character suffering psychological disturbance and being from a religious background is a similar forward glance towards the characterization of *The Dream Songs*, that is in the language the character produces: 'Licking my long lips, I looked upon God | And he flamed and he was friendlier.' Any identification with madness, chaos and damnation, as in 'The Possessed', brings out powerful lyrical qualities, a feeling of dealing in absolutes: 'I nod a dance and they dance in the rain | In my red coat. I am the king of the dead.'

'The Song of the Young Hawaiian' is a song of a man full of life and youthful abandon, who refuses to obey the 'Strengthless [...] tame will of the elder's eyes.' An unfamiliar voice, the young Hawaiian is suited to the almost alien language of the poem, just as he would not be suited to the calm European tone of the Audenesque Berryman. The invention Berryman had previously forced, comes from the mouths of

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[10] Berryman, Preface to *The Dispossessed*, in *Collected Poems* (London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1990; first publ., New York: William Sloane Associates, 1948), p. 288.

others with sudden naturalness. The Hawaiian's optimism defies the superstitious warnings of the elders, and he enjoys his observation, especially of the girls.

> The swaying sun
> Brushes the brown tips of them stiffly softly
> And whispers me: Never take only one
> As the yellow men the white the foreigners do.

The poetry here is freed from the rhetoricism, the need to proffer advice, and demonstrates a focused technique of characterization in the scope of a short lyric. In the space he provides for himself he produces a snapshot of personality, a glimpse that is mysterious but not inaccessible. A witty commentary on academia, echoed later in such Dream Songs as 35, 'MLA', can be found in 'A Professor's Song'. We join him, as if arriving late for a lecture, in a bracketed end of a sentence which hints at the attitude of the professor: '(. . rabid or dog-dull.).' The poem evokes the weariness, the irascible ennui of the teacher whose subject has, with repetition, lost its interest: 'I want to end these fellows all by noon.' The professor is dismissive of talent and art, bored with poetry: '"A poet is a man speaking to men": | But I am then a poet, am I not?— | Ha Ha.' The short inconsequential sentences simulate effectively the rambling unfocused speech of a teacher long since without inspiration. Of a more sinister tone is 'The Song of the Tortured Girl': 'I could not have told— | But no one asked me this—why I was there.' The girl is apparently trapped, along with her family by 'strange men'. Her voice in the poem is a mixture of the immature and the poetic. She is a young girl aged by her experience; what that experience exactly is, apart from some kind of imprisonment, is not clear. She may have been raped: 'I feel them stretch my youth and throw a switch.' In the final stanza, she attempts to escape the torment of her current state, by concentrating on the outside world and on pleasant memories:

> Through leafless branches the sweet wind blows
> Making a mild sound, softer than a moan;
> High in a pass once where we put our tent,
> Minutes I lay awake to hear my joy.
> —I no longer remember what they want.—
> Minutes I lay awake to hear my joy.

The memory of being outside, 'high in a pass once' mingles with the girl's attempts to allay her fears at night in an ironic repetition of her 'joy'. The sense the reader gets is that the girl lies awake because she clearly cannot sleep, is afraid of nightmares; the weary line, between repetition, of 'I no longer remember what they want' seems to confirm the irony of her joy, when she has evidently been tortured into a delirious state of manic sleeplessness. Berryman presents an incomplete picture of a female character whose voice, in its poeticized state suggests also something of the way he makes the persona of the poet intrude upon that of the character in *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, although as with the hints here of what was to come in *The Dream Songs*, this is only embryonically evident. However, it is clear that his preoccupations with the way persona works in a poem, how the poet intrudes on his work, and how the poet's fears about posterity, fame and age are translated into a sadness at those already lost, can all be traced to some extent in this formative work.

2. *Berryman's Sonnets*

In 1947 Berryman embarked on an intense extra-marital affair with a woman married to a friend of the Berrymans, and during and after it he wrote, in a remarkable burst of creativity, over a hundred sonnets about his new found, illicit love. The poems make up a personal diary of his obsession, so personal in Berryman's opinion that they were too sensitive or unsatisfactory to publish at the time, and he waited twenty years before considering them safe to enter the public domain. Even then, in 1966, he felt it necessary to change certain names, places and dates. There might be some critical conflict regarding this non-publication of *Sonnets*. Linebarger suggests that Berryman's attitude towards their status led him to discount the sonnets as public work, so that he had the freedom to write more personally than in his published poetry: 'In the very personal *Sonnets*, the poet was able to overcome his natural reticence because, at the time he wrote them, he did not envision that they could ever

be published.'[11] William Meredith states that 'the Sonnets are full of puns and transfixed clichés. Their intended privacy may have seemed to license this.'[12] The openness is largely in terms of Berryman's love, expressed as never before. The sonnets are Petrarchan, with some slight variations; the rhyme scheme generally follows the pattern ABBA ABBA CDECDE, with an occasional variation of CDECED. The form is consciously that of a great deal of classical love poetry, and in the affair's timing from spring to autumn, the use of typically pastoral imagery is concordant. The affair, and the poem opens in 'middle March'. The poet, when writing this, is conscious of tradition, but still has his own expression. There is a freedom of language, a great deal of scrambled syntax, and novel word use and arrangement. There are many wonderfully precise short love expressions: 'other voices bred | Yours in my quick ear.' This phrase in particular might be a self-conscious poetical reference, those other voices being Yeats's and Auden's; after them he discovered hers, or rather his own reflected by her love — he found his voice when he found his passion. In the first sonnet he describes his wariness of that passion, as well as his eagerness to consummate it:

> But who not flanks the wells of uncanny light
> Sudden in bright sand towering? A bone sunned white.
> Considering travellers bypass these and parch.

This seems to be saying that his lover represents an oasis, 'the wells', but the 'bone sunned white' represents a warning to he who would drink from the wells, and sensible husbands ('considering travellers') 'bypass' blonde women, and 'parch'.

Despite the supposed openness of these secret poems to which Linebarger refers, it remains in many parts cryptic, though not academically so. The poems are sometimes encoded like a diary, to protect memories from too much interference. This is an irreconcilable issue in terms of the meaning of poetry, and Berryman surely shared this uncertainty about how honest one should be, as indicated by the introductory poem:

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[11] Linebarger, p. 51.
[12] William Meredith, 'A Bright Surviving Actual Scene', in *Berryman's Understanding*, pp. 97-109 (p. 107)(first publ. in *Harvard Advocate* (1969), 19-22).

> He made, a thousand years ago, a-many songs
> for an Excellent lady, wif whom he was in wuv,
> shall he now publish them? [...]
> The original fault was whether wickedness
> was soluble in art.

In publishing the poems he does not redeem this fault. The wickedness prevails, but the poet seems embarrassed to mention it. It is perhaps the case that Berryman, like all poets sensitive to their fame, knew that at some point this work would be published, be it after his death or otherwise, so that even in the most private of writings, he could not bring himself to be entirely open. The compiler of Berryman's poetry apart from *The Dream Songs*, Charles Thornbury, goes back to the original manuscripts of *Sonnets* and replaces the pseudonyms of the first publication with the real name of his love, Chris and not Lise.[13] This is a significant emendation, and gives the poem a very different stylistic feel in certain parts; moreover he renames the work *Sonnets to Chris*, Berryman's original title which places the emphasis suddenly on the object of the poet's desire rather than on the poet himself, as with *Berryman's Sonnets*. In the text, the name changes give a greater formal tightness in some sonnets, where the half-rhyme caused by 'Lise' is replaced with the correct original rhyme of 'Chris'. However, Sonnet 113, one of the seven written just prior to publication in 1966, makes deliberate use of the name Lise in its punning opening lines, and this is lost in the revised edition: "I didn't see anyone else, I just saw Lies' | Anne Frank remorseful from the grave'. Pronounced 'Leez', the name only achieves its pun when the sequence as a whole involves the character Lise, and the use of Lise only in this sonnet seems to add to the confusion. In Sonnet 18, however, the importance of the use of Chris is clear in the rhythm and punning of 'You Chris *contrite* I never thought to see. | Whom nothing fazes, no *crise* can disconcert' (my emphasis on 'crise').

Sonnet 7 contains a disturbing prescient discussion of suicide: someone fell from the Empire State Building, and Berryman makes a joke of this, which Chris does not find amusing. She says "One has a right not to be fallen on!" In the end the poet

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13 *Collected Poems*, p. 303.

uses this discussion as another metaphor for his desire, saying that he is 'crazy with need to fall on you despairing'; this is clearly a line of love, but when one knows the nature of Berryman's suicide it is hard not to see an irony in the discussion of falling, especially to fall 'despairing'. Sonnet 114 was written in 1966 but talks knowingly about the 'future' as laid out in the sequence, which is in itself a paradoxical past and present:

> and you will come for years, above, below,
> & through to interrupt my study [...]
> you are the text [...]
> [...]for all the past
> undone & never again to walk tall.

Here he still seems bothered by feelings of guilt about the relationship, but this guilt is connected to that of *The Dream Songs* by the tree that is central to Sonnet 10: 'You in your stone home where the sycamore | More than I see you sees you.' Chris' house was bordered by a sycamore, from which Berryman sat to observe her unseen, and which he likened to her own body: 'As first when I sat down among your trees'(Sonnet 8). But in Dream Song 1, Henry remembers 'Once in a sycamore I was glad | all at the top, and I sang.' This brief moment of happiness, that seems lost in the overriding sadness of Dream Song 1, is a moment now also associated with guilt. The sonnets are full of such intriguing proleptic references.

In Sonnet 40 Berryman again invokes Shakespeare, as in the lines 'Marble nor monuments whereof we spoke | We speak of no more', which is strongly reminiscent of Shakespeare's Sonnet 55: 'Not marble nor the gilded monuments | Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme.' In the consciousness of his derivation, Berryman assimilates his acknowledgement of the past with his concern for the future of the relationship, in the line 'A renaissance fashion not to be recalled.' The *Sonnets*, then are not merely a personal diary of obsession, for the poet is constantly aware of craft. In Sonnet 24 he questions Chris' doubts about their love ('Still it pleads and rankles: 'Why do you love *me*?'), but in the middle of the octet concedes, perhaps to the reader, that 'the octet will be weaker.' As Linebarger notes, Berryman is aware of the

precedents of love poetry and of sonnet-couples, so his allusions to them are well informed:

> The poet's complete familiarity with the traditions allows him to follow them, modify them, or parody them in ways that are his own. The notion in romantic love that the lovers are unique is repeated here (86), despite frequent comparisons of these two with lovers of the past — with Tristan and Iseult (109), Petrarch and Laura (15) [...] David and Bathsheba(21), Oedipus and Jocasta (96) [...], Stephen Crane and Helen Trent (99) and others.[14]

The association of illicit love with death in the sonnets may also be referred to through the way Berryman mentions poets and notable figures because of an apparent relevance to his theme in their personal lives. In Sonnet 12 he mentions 'Hölderlin on his tower'; while tutoring, Hölderlin fell in love with the wife of his employer, succumbing to schizophrenia after the destruction of this relationship.[15] Similarly Sonnet 47 alludes to King Arthur's cuckolding by Lancelot. William Meredith, regarding this sonnet, talks of the impossibility of complete honesty in an adulterous relationship: 'Sonnet 47 [...] seems to make clear that the sonnets are a secret truth in a situation where love and honour are incompatible — a truth not to be spoken.' [16]

There is a recurring theme in the *Sonnets* that arises from the fact of their being written in Chris' absence. Very often she is out of town, and his tone is rather self-pitying that she is not with him. In Sonnet 55 he writes 'I can't believe you will come back.' In the end she cannot, and Berryman the man realizes the unworkability of the affair, but Berryman the poet cannot. In Sonnet 59 he indulges in pastoral musings on the transience of love and life: 'Summer like a bee | Sucks out our best, thigh-brushes and is gone[...]Flowers at the come of summer beautiful and narrow.' Again there is a similarity here to e. e. cummings, and like cummings Berryman is striving linguistically to express profound love and anxiety by overstretching the language, with unusual juxtapositions. In Sonnet 68 he admits to this attempt: 'I prod our English: cough me up a word.' While searching for words the poet is also

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[14] Linebarger, p. 64

[15] 'For him [Hölderlin], being a poet meant exercising the priestly function of mediator between gods and men. [...] Symptoms of great nervous irritability alarmed his family and friends.' *Encyclopædia Brittannica*, 5th edn, vol 5, p. 982

[16] Meredith, p. 99

searching for a way out of the relationship, or a way to stabilize it, but his indecision is more evident than his determination to make things work. He tells his lover in Sonnet 69 that he is 'collared' to leave his wife for her, but admits he is mad to do so: 'I pull | Crazy away from this.' He presents in mitigation of this view a rather patronizing picture of his wife Eileen without him: 'Unhappy all her lone strange life until | Somehow I friended it.' This view is reiterated in Sonnet 83, where the poet feels he is insulting Eileen by staying with her only out of pity. The tangled, painful emotion bound up in the sequence is clearly part of the reason for withholding it for so long, but the invention with which Berryman elicits intense personal emotion on a sustained level is a clear precursor of the work of his maturity, for which persona and its intensity is crucial.

3. *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*

Stanley Kunitz says of Berryman's first major long poem that

> the scaffolding of the poem is too frail to bear the weight imposed upon it [...] the substance of the poem as a whole lacks inherent imaginative grandeur: whatever effect of magnitude it achieves has been beaten into it.[17]

It admittedly seems strange that Berryman should choose a poet of whom he thought so little; but the narrative possibilities, regarding Bradstreet's life aside from her poetry are great, and one might suggest that Berryman does not fully exploit these in his desire to contort the realities of her history to his own ends. Even these ends seem arbitrary. Is the modulation of voice at the end of the fourth stanza as deliberate as the poet makes it seem in his notes? I would suggest that only when he returned to his barely written script, years after beginning it in 1947, did Berryman discover the avenue that he might take to make the poem more distinctive. The ostensible reason seems to be to allow some preliminary explanation of her situation, but the poet seems to happen on dialogue in the poem by accident. He speaks first to her ghost: 'the

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[17] Stanley Kunitz, 'No Middle Flight', in *Berryman's Understanding*, pp. 110-116 (p112)(first publ. in *Poetry*, 90 (1957), 244-249).

Governor your husband lived so long | moved you not, restless, waiting for him?' In the course of the poem the poet moves bodily into the text, seeming to take Bradstreet's place. But Berryman's attitude towards Anne confuses the truth of the poem's positioning. He is aware she was not a great poet, but also notes her bad taste in other poets, Sylvester and Quarles. Berryman raises the issue of gender at the point at which his male poetic persona intrudes upon Anne, but fails to resolve this issue satisfactorily. In the twelfth stanza she tells us of her poetry: 'Versing, I shroud among the dynasties [...] tireless I phrase | anything past, dead, far, | sacred, for a barbarous place.' In stanza 42, 'the proportioned, spiritless poems accumulate.' This is not Bradstreet's but Berryman's voice, not any kind of Poundian ventriloquism. This is a major flaw in the poem: its lack of authenticity. The fact that this is stated by the poet at the outset does not help the reader's acceptance of the history, even if it is fictional. Berryman usurps the real story and does not provide a fully-formed replacement. There is so much emphasis on the twentieth-century perspective, that the point of view of Bradstreet does, as Kunitz says, struggle under the weight of the poem's concept. Berryman is keen to re-evaluate her place as a female pilgrim and poet, but he applies his own criteria. He makes her see herself not as she would have done but how he wants to see her. He tells us, through her, that she was a sinner at fourteen, and that Simon married her out of pity for her pox-ridden face. There is no evidence that this is true, but it allows the poet to share that pity from all perspectives. In stanza twelve the male poet interrupts and raises the issue that her verse was 'To please your wintry father' (l. 5). There are numerous references to her subjection to the will of a patriarchal society. She is shown to succumb to the decisions of her father and husband as law ('Their will be done'(14, l. 5)) but it is not clear if Berryman is putting words in her mouth in this respect. In a similar light, John Frederick Nims berates Berryman for making the journey to and arrival in America seem more miserable than was apparent from John Winthrop's *Journal*, which says that they ate well and were not sick.[18] The poet seems to relish episodes of horror,

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[18] John Frederick Nims, 'Screwing Up the Theorbo: Homage in Measure to Mr. Berryman', in

pain and anguish, and describes them with much vividness, notably Anne's childbirth from stanzas 19 to 21:

> Stalling. He let go. Come back: brace
> me somewhere. No. No. Yes! everything down
> hardens I press with horrible joy down
> my back cracks like a wrist
> shame I am voiding oh behind it is too late

The agony and unpunctuated panic is well documented, but seems in excess of the situation. There are contiguous problems with the dialogue which begins at stanza 25 between Anne and the male, modern poet. When Anne's female friend and confidant is banished, she becomes susceptible to his haunting. She is lamenting the loss of a trusted female companion ('Bitter sister, victim! I miss you), when he interrupts almost aggressively: 'I miss you, Anne, | day or night weak as a child.' Berryman apparently wants to make mischievous use of the fictitious dialogue he has created by putting Anne into a vulnerable situation, in excess of the facts, so that she can be seduced by her twentieth-century counterpart. He is audacious enough to say 'I have earned the right to be alone with you.' She asks how he could love her and lists her personal unattractiveness. Nims remarks on the strangeness of his attraction given this:

> The poet's passion for the body of his poetess is strange too in that (in spite of some lovely lines on her lost beauty) he prefers to dwell on physical aspects not normally the object of desire: her 'cratered' skin, the cracking vertebrae, 'wretched trap,' and unruly colon of her childbed experiences, her retchings, her broodings on her naked body, her 'pustules snapping,' her rheumatic joints, her 'body a-drain,' her dropsical arm and wrecked chest, her hangnails and piles. *Oh Beatrice, dolce guida e cara!* [19]

Anne is the ideal victim for the stereotypical seduction, since she protests, but not too much, and is susceptible to the poet's overtures, his sweet nothings:

> It is Spring's New England. Pussy willows wedge
> up in the wet. Milky crestings, fringed
> yellow to heaven, eyed
> by the melting hand-in-hand or mere
> desirers single, heavy-footed, rapt.

Berryman's Understanding, pp. 117-126 (p. 122)(first publ. in *Prairie Schooner*, 32 (1958), 1-7).
[19] ibid., p. 121

In stanza 33 the speaker is 'drowning in this past,' in love with a figure of history and lost in the possibilities of time 'Unbraced | in delirium of the grand depths.' Fulfilling his role as the oppressive male, he imagines that he has killed women. Anne reassures him that 'You are good,' and that 'God awaits us,' but he counters her with predictable, but incomplete, pessimism: 'I cannot feel myself God waits [...] Man is entirely alone | may be.' Anne rails against the dominance of men in stanza 37: 'a male great pestle smashes | small women swarming towards the mortar's rim in vain,' while the poet intends to evince an underlying empathy here, the enduring image is of Anne as victim rather than poet, who seems to plead for a redeeming death, as in stanza 44: 'Finish, Lord, in me this work thou hast begun.' In stanza 49 she deliriously imagines herself burning, appropriately for a pilgrim who confesses to have been 'carnal' at fourteen. By deliberately introducing a picture of himself into the poem, Berryman may have been secretly second-guessing criticism of a work ruled by its subjectivity, where the figure of Bradstreet is dominated by modern mores in a semi-antiquated diction. The work conforms fully to neither Berryman's nor Bradstreet's times, but the point of view, even when intended to be Bradstreet's, is always Berryman's. It seems he may have wanted to remove subjectivity as a background problem by making it as explicit as possible; yet in many respects it remains too subtle to have been fully worked out.

In the poet's conclusion in the final four stanzas he writes: 'I must pretend to leave you.' He pretends to leave Anne because he was never with her. But whereas certain poems of *The Dispossessed* exhibit a concern with ghosts, and anticipate some similar content in *The Dream Songs*, *Bradstreet* is altogether more visceral, in that it attempts to unite disparate psyches in the physicality of human life and love. That the poem is still a literary conceit, whose language does not bring about a suspension of disbelief or the involving disguise of traditional fiction, makes it all the more difficult to accept its premise. In the final stanza, the line 'O all your ages at the mercy of my loves' is a useful coda to the difficulty the poem presents. His multiple loves follow all her ages; in this sense she is merely a literary construct and not a woman; she has

periods of her life, with which the poet is individually infatuated, sections seen from a perspective outside her lifetime. *Bradstreet* is demonstrative of Berryman's interest in literary longevity, and, in a similar way perhaps to *The Aspern Papers*, exposes the dangers of biography, and attachment to those literary figures whose emotions exist only in text, and out of context; Berryman's work here is a demonstration that such a problem exists, rather than a solution to it. In an elegiac sense, the poem takes empathy and identification to an extreme, but does not genuinely elegize because it retains an academic distance. While it is full of intense physicality and stark diction, its potential directness of emotion is occluded by the explicit artifice of the original conceit: the adulterous poets across the stretch of time. Nevertheless, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* can still be seen as the clear forerunner of *The Dream Songs*, the culmination of earlier attempts to marry a distinctive diction to a use of persona that updates the modernism by which Berryman was influenced. Through a series of radical shifts in style, he seems to have arrived at a voice which, in *The Dream Songs*, allows him to take in disparate concerns without incongruity, so that the manner of Henry can accommodate the elements of the comic, lyrical, surreal, romantic, harshly physical, and elegiac that can be observed disparately in the earlier works described above.

Chapter Four
'A disadvantage of surviving': Henry's Elegies and Berryman's Loss

I want to move now to the core of Berryman's achievement in respect of mourning poetry, the elegiac poems of *The Dream Songs*, and the overall question of what constitutes the elegiac that are thereby raised. James Bloom refers to Berryman's similarity to Yeats in terms of their respective proclivity to mourn: 'For Yeats's mainly elegiac oeuvre is, like Berryman's, haunted by dead friends, mentors, martyrs, colleagues.'[1] Like Yeats, Berryman seems to have been fated to the role of elegist by the circumstances of tragic history that surrounded him, the death of each friend or admired figure compounded by his own precarious survival, despite the physical and emotional punishment he allowed himself to endure. Moreover, what I believe marks Berryman out as primarily an elegist is a kind of obsessive empathy, which goes beyond expressions of identification common in pastoral modes of elegy, and which is bound up in his deployment of Henry as a psychological locus, a figure that represents both the guilt engendered by family history and a concomitant ambivalence towards death. Henry represents grief with an intensity beyond identification, because while being a unifying figure thematically, he is paradoxically but fundamentally disembodied and ultimately unidentifiable. This incompleteness is itself emblematic of mourning. It is the psychical distancing to which Joseph Mancini refers that may be aligned with the essential representation of elegy:

> In using the dialogue format, Berryman first discovered each of his voices by negating it, that is, by distancing and so distinguishing it from the ground of his being. Once each voice was granted figuration or personification, it could speak to other, similarly derived voices until they realized their interdependence and innate harmony. In reconciling their opposing perspectives without losing their distinctive qualities, these voices could finally utter together what is more than the sum of its parts: a comprehensive or holistic, lyrical voice grounded in a dramatic dynamic.[2]

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[1] James D. Bloom, *The Stock of Available Reality* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press), 1984, p. 79.

[2] Joseph Mancini, Jr., *The Berryman Gestalt: Therapeutic Strategies in the Poetry of John Berryman* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1987), p. 2.

Following from this I would suggest that what makes Berryman's approach to elegy distinctive is the fact that the internal dialogue as described above is, in its derivation, an elegiac dialogue. Its greatest intensity arises when the voices engaged are those of the dead, when the song is one of a spirit; Henry reacts to the spirit as if it were a facet of himself distanced in the way Mancini describes. The multiple voices that can be heard in *The Dream Songs* are Berryman's means of versifying a sense of loss and personal dislocation. When Henry experiences a loss, therefore, it is felt to the extent that something has been lost in himself. His identification becomes a subsuming of personae, an identification not only with the personality of the figure he mourns but with the loss itself (need need need | until he went to pieces. | The pieces sat up & wrote. They did not heed | their piecedom but kept very quietly on | among the chaos' (Song 311)). Berryman quite often switches person within a Song, as if the distancing was a palliative against the emotional pain of what is confronted. The dualism of the 'I' and the 'Henry' in the Songs entails a use of pronouns as a thematic trope, incorporating not only the dramatic tension of dialogue and difference but also making the poetic voice appeal to various simultaneous sympathies. By placing Henry in the third person, Berryman posits elegy as both an irony of the poet's empathetic stance and as a literary representation, accordant with twentieth-century mores, of the mechanics of mourning, the effect on the soul of persistent loss and recurring occasions for grief. As in Song 235, to Hemingway, Berryman expresses a simple and direct loss, but the device of Henry places him implicitly alongside his subject:

> Tears Henry shed for poor old Hemingway
> Hemingway in despair, Hemingway at the end,
> the end of Hemingway,
> tears in a diningroom in Indiana
> and that was years ago, before his marriage say,
> God to him no worse luck send.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the repetition of 'Hemingway', the pronoun in 'before his marriage' is permitted some occlusion as to its referent because of the stressing of Henry and his 'tears' in the first line. Similarly, Song 267 to Louis MacNeice creates

an uncertainty in its attribution of pronouns by inserting a relation to Henry at an unexpected point:

> My love for Louis transcended his good work,
> and—older than Henry—saw him not in the dark
> & suffocating.

The introduction of Henry here brings him into the reader's mind when he comes to 'saw him not in the dark'. Henry is implicitly conflated with MacNeice, put in his place, so that while 'him' seems to refer ostensibly to MacNeice, the interjected 'older than Henry' lends attachment through proximity; and the alignment of Henry alongside MacNeice as an object of the poem's expression, not its speaker, is reinforced by the use of 'My love for *him*' rather than for MacNeice (my emphasis).

Berryman's accommodation of twentieth-century notions of death and its implications seems heavily grounded in his well-documented concerns with Freud. At an early stage in his career, he attempted an elegy to Freud, and from 1947 he underwent regular psychoanalysis.[3] Certain works in particular seem to have shaped his approach to the process of mourning and can be partly drawn upon as exemplars of his method. For instance, *Totem and Taboo* highlights the 'tormenting doubts' that visit the survivor when a loved one has died — the feeling that they are somehow 'responsible for the death of this cherished being through some act of carelessness or neglect.'[4] Kathe Davis notes Berryman's discovery of this sensation during his analysis in 1947: 'he arrived at "The Oedipus. I realize suddenly — I never did before — that I may have *wished* Daddy's death, and may feel permanent guilt for the satisfaction of my wish."'[5]

Freud further identifies processes of primitive people as comparable to that of present-day neurotics in their anxiety and ambivalence over the death of loved ones, as in 'projection' of their repressed hostility: 'The defence against it [the hostility] takes the form of displacing it on to the object of the hostility, on to the dead

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[3] Paul Mariani, *Dream Song: The Life of John Berryman* (New York: Morrow, 1990), pp. 111, 198.
[4] Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. by James Strachey, in The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), XIII, p. 60.
[5] Davis, p. 55.

themselves.'[6] An aspect of this displaced hostility may be relevant to the Songs' reference to Henry's father as an enemy, as in Song 9:'Deprived of his enemy, shrugged to a standstill | horrible Henry, foaming'; or Song 196: 'I see now all these deaths are to one end— | whereby I lost a foe, friend upon friend— | room [...] Fresh spring them enemies.' This hostility theme may be brought into focus by Freud's mention of 'this process which turns a dead man into an enemy.' Freud also discusses an observation that some primitive tribes have a taboo against mentioning the name of a loved one who has died, arising, he suggests, from the fear that saying his name will invoke the dead man's demon.[7] The relevance of this to Berryman cannot be ignored, in his personal biography and in his poetry; his aforementioned obsession with his name, changed from his father's only weeks after his death, echoed in the early poem 'A Point of Age', may be suggestive of this fear of invocation of the demon that tormented him. In the elegies to fellow artists Berryman appears to have no compunction about using their names; indeed as Song 235 to Hemingway or Song 147 to Schwartz shows, the name is used as a repetitive device, and an argumentative correlation to this may be found in Freud's account that tribes would often change the name of the dead person as part of the same fear of demonic retribution, so that they could still speak of the dead without fear of invoking their spirits. We might say that in *The Dream Songs* Henry has changed the name of his deceased enemy, using instead the names of lost friends and mentors, whose souls he does not fear. Moreover the uncertainty of Henry's name (his pseudonyms, 'Mr Bones', 'Pussycat', 'Henry Hankovitch', 'Henry House' and so on) may be accorded with the commentary Berryman provides that Henry 'dies' a number of times through the poem, and that ultimately he is, in the context of the Songs, a dead man; he is simply an illusory device that permits the enunciation of mourning (in his *Paris Review* interview from 1970 Berryman says of Henry: 'For example, he dies in book IV and is dead throughout the book, but at the end of the poem he is still alive, and in fairly good condition, after having died himself *again.*'). *The Dream Songs* reads as an epic

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[6] *Totem and Taboo*, p. 61.
[7] *Totnem and Taboo*, p. 55.

attempt to resolve the personal and the universal, and Berryman's intentions seem further informed by Freud's extraordinary statement in *Totem and Taboo*:

> It might be maintained that a case of hysteria is a caricature of a work of art, that an obsessional neurosis is a caricature of a religion and that a paranoic delusion is a caricature of a philosophical system. The divergence resolves itself ultimately into the fact that the neuroses are social structures; they endeavour to achieve by private means what is effected in society by collective effort.[8]

This tension between the resolution of the personal and universal may be seen at a still more fundamental level in the light of further suggestions by Freud in *Totem and Taboo* and *Civilisation and its Discontents*, a text with which Berryman was very familiar (see my reference to this in the introduction, p.12). In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud centres on his earlier remark on obsessional neurosis as a 'caricature of religion' and foregrounds its apparent derivations:

> The psychoanalysis of human beings, however, teaches us with quite special insistence that the God of each of them is formed in the likeness of his father, that his personal relationship to God depends on his relation to his father in the flesh and oscillates and changes along with that relation, and at bottom God is nothing other than an exalted father.[9]

This hypothesis I feel to be fundamentally relevant to Berryman's creation of a poetics of elegy, and is deeply complex yet somehow self-evident, and seems to make a more profound sense of seemingly childish undisguised lines such as 'God's Henry's enemy'(Song13) and 'I'm cross with god who has wrecked this generation'(Song 153). The fact is, these lines *are* childish, since they make plain the universal crisis that the trauma of childhood (and childhood loss) represents. The inchoate persona of Henry is an analogue of this trauma — he is childishly petulant and yielding to basic desires, he is manically out of control of mood (charted by Berryman verbally in, for example in Song 384 ('Oh ho alas alas')), and above all he strives to resolves his own fragmentation by confronting his and our own ambivalence towards death, from the unexplained 'departure' of Song 1 to the confrontation with death personified in the father in Song 384, followed by the attempted resolution of

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8 *Totem and Taboo*.,p. 73.
9 *Totem and Taboo*.,p. 147.

385 in the vision of 'my heavy daughter'. This attempted resolution stems from a search for something which may further define Henry and the design of The Dream Songs according to Berryman's reading of Freud — that is the capacity for love. Berryman's love and hopes for his daughter despite his uncertainties at the imperfect world she inhabits constitute the hope for reconstruction of the poet's soul in the face of his perceived adversity. Freud's analysis of the conflict between love and destruction in *Civilisation and its Discontents* seems strikingly comparable to *The Dream Songs*, structurally and thematically:

> Against all the evidence of his senses, a man who is in love declares that 'I' and 'you' are one and is prepared to behave as if it were a fact [...] he ascribes to the external world things that clearly originate in his own ego [...] the boundaries of the ego are not constant.[10]

Certainly the boundaries of Henry's ego are not constant, but the interchangeability of 'I' and 'you' in his appearances seems to derive not simply from the character of a man in love but rather a man in trouble, and a further point in Freud's text may attest to this:

> Besides the instinct to preserve living substance and to join it into ever larger units, there must exist another, contrary instinct seeking to dissolve these units and to bring them back to their primeval inorganic state. That is to say as well as Eros there was an instinct of death. The phenomena of life could be explained from the concurrent or mutually opposing action of these two instincts.[11]

Henry seems helplessly at the whim of this notion, and indeed seems to epitomize its manifestation, as he does the later statement, 'Fate is regarded as a substitute for the parental agency.'[12]

Berryman's expression of the elegiac lies in his use of Henry to articulate the struggles of the individual to cope with loss, and to show that struggle as analogous with and annexed to the struggle to achieve concrete identity, and to withstand the whims of fate. As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, the difference in Berryman's approach to elegy is his involvement with the lost figure that goes beyond

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[10] Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, trans. by James Strachey, in The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, XXI, p. 66.
[11] ibid., pp. 118-119.
[12] ibid., p. 126.

identification; yet it is Freud's use of this term in *Mourning and Melancholia* of which Henry is a literary representation: he describes the dissociation involved in a melancholic state of detachment, where the

> free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego. There, however, it was not employed in any unspecified way, but served to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object [...] In this way an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by *identification* [my emphasis][13]

This internal 'cleavage' of the ego seems to identify in its essence the relationship between Henry and his friend, such as the dialogue in Song 36:

> With them all again & again I died
> and cried, and I have to live.
>
> —Now there you exaggerate, Sah. We hafta *die*.
> that is our 'pointed task. Love & die.

Henry is altered by identification to the extent that he has died 'again & again' with those he mourns, while his friend attempts cautious rationality (which seems to miss Henry's point, and if anything makes matters worse). *Mourning and Melancholia* seems to corroborate Berryman's delineation of the process of mourning, notably Henry's much-criticized self pity, which we might understand better if we see Henry's character itself as a process of mourning and reconstruction:

> Where there is a disposition to obsessional neurosis the conflict due to ambivalence gives a pathological cast to mourning and forces it to express itself in the form of self-reproaches to the effect that the mourner himself is to blame for the loss of the loved one, i.e. that he has willed it.[14]

This covers both the biographical ground mentioned earlier in this chapter regarding Berryman's personal discovery of a sense of guilt, as well as the presentation of this guilt in Henry's persona, for example in Song 29's final stanza:

> But never did Henry, as he thought he did,
> end anyone and hacks her body up
> and hide the pieces, where they may be found.
> He knows: he went over everyone, & nobody's missing.
> Often he reckons, in the dawn, them up.

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[13] Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, trans. by James Strachey, in The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, XIV, p. 249.
[14] *Mourning and Melancholia*, p. 251.

Nobody is ever missing.

Freud's writings on mourning and death, then, seem a fundamentally workable analogue of Berryman's deployment of Henry as a figure perpetually in conflict with himself due to his inability to overcome simultaneous and contiguous grief and guilt. Although it seems his attempts are valiant, he fails to achieve the reconciliation with god and the triumph over melancholia that has been part of the elegy tradition.

While Berryman's pursuit of an elegiac voice seems grounded in these central theories of Freud, his range of influence in the explicit matter of his poetry is diverse, and this is also part of Berryman's novelty as an elegist; he is not fixed by an elegiac tradition, nor does he work in simple antagonism to it. Rather he makes the other considerations of his work attendant upon his portrayal of the ambivalence of the mourner, so that the influences he may display are secondary to the presentation of his conceit. Furthermore, the diversity of *The Dream Songs* is centred ultimately in the persona of Henry, whose prime trait is that of loss, and who was engendered as a result of the 'irreversible loss'. Within this context, then, Berryman takes in all outside distractions as material for his verse, giving the quotidian a basis in the elegiac, and allowing space for the quotidian and the unconventional within the elegiac.

For example, in Song 18, entitled 'A Strut for Roethke', Henry conducts a song for the 'Garden Master'. In the *Explicator* of 1973, Jo Porterfield suggests that the song is a version of a jazz funeral in its tone and reference. The first stanza indeed makes it clear that the speaker is conducting musicians, and is telling us of our inferiority to Roethke the flower-poet:

> Westward, hit a low note, for a roarer lost
> across the Sound but north from Bremerton,
> hit a way down note.
> And never cadenza again of flowers, or cost.
> Him who could really do that cleared his throat
> & staggered on.

Porterfield comments that

> Something has been lost — 'a roarer', a musician of flowers. Roethke dealt

> frequently in his poems with various aspects of nature, and the word 'roarer' was a favourite with him [...] 'Westward' not only turns the musicians toward Seattle, Roethke's home at the time of his death, but in the direction of the setting sun and death.[15]

In the final stanza the poet shows his ability to pinpoint another's personal poetics, without ridicule, with comic slang and remarkably compressed meaning:

> Hit a high long note, for a lover found
> needing a lower into friendlier ground
> to bug among worms no more
> around um jungles where ah blurt 'What for?'
> Weeds, too he favoured as most men don't favour men.
> The Garden Master's gone.

Here he refers to Roethke's poetic rendering of his infant explorations of his father's greenhouse, where he would crawl around 'around um jungles'. He also provides a characteristically deceptive line which seems like an aphorism but is ultimately not simple enough: 'Weeds, too, he favoured, as most men don't favour men', which implies at first a lack of human sympathy on Roethke's part but finally appears to mean the opposite. The tone of the elegy is remarkable for its lack of Henry's usual aggressiveness in the face of death, and as it appears early in the sequence it may set a deceptive precedent. I would suggest that it still accords with the notion of Henry as a perpetual mourner; with his psychological machinery in place as it were, Berryman has the licence to demonstrate the instability of mood this may generate by producing an elegy imbued with the sense of celebration and passion of a jazz funeral. Despite this there remains an ironic nod towards the essential pessimism of Henry, when Roethke's final peace is commented on by the bracketed aside, 'O lucky fellow, eh Bones?'

A similarly light but ironic timbre can be found in the elegy to William Carlos Williams, Song 324. The reductive nature of its opening address is almost flippantly light in its sentiment: "Henry in Ireland to Bill underground: | Rest well, who worked so hard, who made a good sound | constantly for so many years.' The reductiveness may be a latent commentary on Williams' own Imagist economies of phrase, while its

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[15] Jo Porterfield, 'Berryman's "A Strut for Roethke"' *Explicator*, 32.4, (1973), article 25.

lightness of mood, more suggestive of words on one's retirement than death, may be contrasted with the subtly jarring reference to a wish for death in the second stanza: 'if envy was a Henry trademark, he would envy you, I especially the being through.' The poem has Henry in the third person, and Williams, though dead, is addressed directly throughout. However, the opening line implies a message spoken directly by Henry. So here we have the tension between the destructive and reconstructive urges, between the critical ego and identifying ego, enacted through Berryman's cleavages of personae. In the final stanza the speaker talks of Henry elaborating on his wish to join Williams in death, where there would be 'no page proofs to read.' The lines 'he would like to lie down I in your sweet silence' suggest not only the silence of death but perhaps the particular serenity of a typical Williams poem, even the famously concise 'This Is Just To Say', which remarks on the plums which were 'so sweet'. So Berryman here manages to incorporate hints of imitation into his own well-defined idiom, while balancing the conflicting moods of his persona and expressing genuine mourning and the aforementioned obsessive empathy.

Song 121, for Randall Jarrell, similarly involves this feeling that is at once consolatory and pessimistic, that the mourned figure is well to be out of life, and the poet is envious partly because he will no longer have to grieve:

> Grief is fatiguing. He is out of it,
> the whole humiliating Human round,
> out of this & that.
> He made a-many hearts go pit-a-pat
> who now need never mind his nostril-hair
> nor a critical error laid bare.

The baldness of the opening lines strangely disguises what Berryman is saying: that what Jarrell is 'out of' is 'Grief', which is equal to 'the whole humiliating Human round'. The conclusion is that life simply is grief, and it is also 'this & that', the tedious everyday life. In the midst of the Song's quasi-nursery diction, Berryman expresses the thought that life is composed of grief. The final stanza's lines that 'Henry is half in love with one of his students I and the sad process continues to the whole I as it swarmed and began' suggest that for Henry the 'humiliating Human

round' is inescapable, other than by joining Jarrell, which seems to be alluded to in the similarity here to Keats's 'I have been half in love with easeful death.' In another elegy to Jarrell, Song 90, the poet achieves a recognition and attempted rejection of the anguish surrounding his loss, speaking to himself with clarity in the second stanza: 'Let Randall rest, whom your self-torturing | cannot restore one instant's good to, rest: | he's left us now.' The state of current grief of the second stanza is framed by the first's retrospective observation of Jarrell's character and the final stanza's portrayal of the paradisiacal circumstances of the friends' anticipated reunion, the two framing stanzas connected by their repetition of the phrase 'beloved faces'. The final stanza places Jarrell's social character, his love of friendship, in the context of the absolutes of existence:

> In the chambers of the end we'll meet again
> I will say Randall, he'll say Pussycat
> and all will be as before
> whenas we sought, among the beloved faces,
> eminence and were dissatisfied with that
> and needed more.

The stanza evokes a sense of striving whereby the two friends expect more in return from their extension of friendship than mere 'eminence'. The playfulness of their friendship as depicted here compares starkly with the apparent superiority of this need for more than 'eminence' and with the harshness of Henry's self-reproaches in the second stanza. This Song is part of the 'Opus Posthumous' sequence of Songs which comprise Book IV, and which represent perhaps most consistently the presence of the elegiac in Henry's ongoing persona, without consisting purely of elegies. Most importantly, Henry 'dies' in this Book, but is described in macabre terms in Song 91 having been brought back from the grave, and subsequently trying to re-inter himself, such is his dissatisfaction with life:

> A fortnight later, sense a single man
> upon the trampled scene at 2 a.m.
> insomnia-plagued, with a shovel
> digging like mad, Lazarus with a plan
> to get his own back, a plan a stratagem
> no newsman will unravel.

The physical yearning for the comfort of death in this Song is comical yet disturbing and is emblematic of Henry's identification with the dead. His expressed wish to be in the place of those he mourns, to be dead, is followed through in the poem beyond a symbolic empathy to a physical depiction of Henry carrying out his own wish. This graveyard scene is anticipated in Song 88, in which Berryman does not elegize but observes pessimistically the slow decline towards death of Bhain Campbell, one of his closest friends, of cancer. His journey to Campbell on his death-bed is not regarded altruistically, but scornfully compared with his testimony to death as a source of creative stimulation: 'In slack times visit I the violent dead | and pick their awful brains.' Campbell, 'racked with high hopes', is compared with two other dying men; Yeats, with 'only the grand gift in his head going for him', and Dylan Thomas, at whose death Berryman was effectively present. While arousing the question posed in another guise in traditional elegy forms, about the values involved in making poetry out of mourning, Berryman seems to suggest that the mourning of the living is equally problematic.

Berryman's observations on the death of Robert Frost seem complicated by this uncertainty at the role of formal elegy, and by the Freudian ambivalence that characterizes Henry's voice. The first thing mentioned about Frost is 'His malice'. The tone of Song 37 in general is so offhand as to make the reader uncomfortable at its equivocation. Henry says that he 'must be sorry | Mr Frost has left', as if he feels obliged to mourn his loss. He tends almost towards sarcasm in saying: 'He apologize to Henry, off & on, | for two blue slanders; which was good of him.' The enigmatic 'I can't say what I have in mind' hints at further ambivalence, perhaps to the effect that what Henry does have in mind is inappropriate to the elegy, and follows through the uncharitable sentiments that are implied, as in Song 38 where the feeling that Frost mistreated his secretary and her family ('ah but it's Kay | & Ted, & Chis & Anne, | Henry thinks of') vitiates the noble defence of him against commercialism in the last stanza of the Song. The clipped statements found in Song 121 to Jarrell are echoed here, but with a pejorative cast; the Songs suggest he can't find an uncomplicated,

passionate emotion to express at the loss of Frost, and has to say with apparent disappointment, 'I'm afraid that's it' in Song 39, which could be construed as meaning that that's the end of a line of great poets, but is made ambivalent by its context. The psychological undercurrent for this element of distance may be the notion of Frost as a father-figure. Frost is addressed, seemingly with awe, as 'sir', and the first stanza of Song 39, given a Freudian slant, might reveal more:

> Goodbye, sir, & fare well. You're in the clear.
> 'Nobody' (Mark says you said) 'is ever found out.'
> I figure you were right,
> having as Henry got away with murder
> for long.

'You're in the clear' echoes Song 121's 'He is out of it', but implies further that Frost has escaped some sort of punishment, which is compounded in the next line about being 'found out'. The atmosphere of guilt is crystallized by a sense of unwanted solidarity as Henry feels he 'got away with murder'. Given Henry's psyche, the feeling conveyed by 'murder' is not simply figurative, and is given shape by Henry's feelings elsewhere in the Songs that he really is guilty of murder. By seeing Frost as a father-figure, referred to reverently as 'sir', Henry is associating him with his own father, and the guilt and ambivalence he feels over his death is translated into a coolness and uncertainty towards Frost. When Berryman attempts a purer expression of loss, his syntax becomes clouded, and his concern seems firstly with those left behind by Frost; in an echo of 'Acquainted with the Night', Henry says that time is running out, not for clean-living Frost, but for the forsaken, the 'lorn', like Henry:

> Some jarred clock tell me it's late,
> not for you who went straight
> but for the lorn.
> [...] I figure you with love,
> lifey, deathy, but I have a little sense
> the rest of us are fired
> or fired.

For Frost the time was 'neither wrong nor right', but for Henry even that uncertainty is too comfortable; he knows his time is up, and his 'little sense' is sardonic understatement, complemented by sour punning on 'fired', either the fire of creativity

in the face of impending doom, or of redundancy, or of suicide by gun, a ubiquitous implement in *The Dream Songs*, such as Hemingway's shotgun in Song 34:

> My mother has your shotgun. One man, wide
> in the mind, and tendoned like a grizzly, pried
> to his trigger-digit, pal.
> He should not have done that, but, I guess,
> he didn't feel the best, Sister,—felt less
> and more about less than us . . . ?

Hemingway might similarly be seen as a father-figure, but here we have the distance from Frost replaced by a confrontational tone that, at the same time as grieving more openly, attempts to understand Hemingway's suicide ('I guess, he didn't feel the best, Sister'). It may be that the similarity of Hemingway's death to Henry's original loss brings the need for confrontation with his own demons into sharper focus. The fact that Berryman never personally knew Hemingway seems incidental.

Similarly he never knew Sylvia Plath personally, but in Song 172 Berryman regards her photograph as a staring face, and hence allows himself a jarring intimacy and a barely concealed resentment at another suicide which he has mystifyingly outlived. Henry seems to appreciate the circumstances of her suicide, but then loads this with irony, having seen her go 'on round the bend | till the oven seemed the proper place for you.' The dubious voice continues as we are reminded that she was by her death a single mother, and questions the morality of leaving her children behind while she took her life: 'I allow | your resignation from us now | though the screams of orphaned children fix me anew.' Henry's ultimate complaint, however, is that Plath is another poet leaving him behind, making him wonder that by staying alive he's doing something wrong:

> long falls your exit all repeatingly,
> a poor exemplum, one more suicide
> to stack upon the others
> till stricken Henry with his sisters & brothers
> suddenly gone pauses to wonder why he
> alone breasts the wronging tide.

This kind of voice is peculiar not only to twentieth-century elegy, but to Berryman's poetics. It encapsulates Auden's art of identification through imitation, as discussed

by Ramazani, but enmeshes a literary identification with emotional and psychological ones, which Auden shies away from.[16] Phrases such as 'a poor exemplum' seem reminiscent of Plath's rhythms and diction, and the final stanza as a whole is suggestive of the stark phrasing and harsh imagery of her celebrated late work. While Berryman may exhibit a disapproval of Plath, his elegy has total stylistic and thematic empathy; the images of 'the oven' and of 'one more suicide | to stack upon the others' complement Plath's noted use of Nazi imagery, in evoking scenes of concentration camps and mass burial.

Berryman uses so many forms to mourn, perhaps to accommodate in verse the number of deaths he came close to, and it is impossible to define a particular style, or mode of expressing grief, except that even if the presence of Henry fluctuates from one elegy to another, it is the question of the surviving self in an ongoing scene of mourning that is always paramount. In Song 173 R. P. Blackmur is mourned, with whom Berryman shared an office at Princeton in the 1940s. The level of imitation or stylistic empathy here is less obvious, but its tone is notable for a particularly unsettled manic uncertainty, unlike the elegies to Plath or Frost. Henry instead is at a loss for a new system of mourning, as evinced in the line 'What rhythm shall we use for Richard's death?' In the first stanza Henry says 'I am not full of fear', but in the second, 'I fill with fear'. This realization that he is in fact afraid seems to be aroused by the silence after Blackmur's death: 'Richard is quiet who talked on so well.' An additional fear is uncertainty of Blackmur's (and implicitly his own) resting place: 'Where will he lie? | In a tantrum of horror & blocking where will he be?' Henry's self-reassurance that he will be with his wife is frantically confirmed: 'see! see! see!', yet even this is tempered by the knowledge that that place is 'not nearby'.

In Book V there are a couple of Songs which test the convention of elegy more than the above Songs to Plath and Blackmur, despite their equivocations; Song 127 introduces once again a contemplation of the death of Randall Jarrell, although he is unnamed in the Song, who walked out in front of traffic and was killed: 'His

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[16] Ramazani, p. 177.

friend's death had been adjudged suicide'. The motif of weariness in the elegy to Blackmur, struggling to find a new rhythm to mourn, is reiterated here with more specific force, as Henry finds himself listening to the voices of the dead:

> the throngs of souls in hopeless pain rise up
> to say they cannot care, to say they abide
> whatever is to come.
> My air is flung with souls which will not stop
> and among them hangs a soul that has not died
> and refuses to go home.

The souls of the world are here benign in their acceptance of death, they are exhausted by 'hopeless pain' and they 'cannot care' or be shocked by any new tragedy, but are forced to accept the fate to which they have already succumbed. Similarly, Henry is haunted relentlessly by 'souls which will not stop', but he provides a hint of the greatest torment, that by his personal ghost, his father, who 'has not died, | and refuses to come home'. The incompleteness, the 'open wound' (to use Freud's term), of Henry's grief is stirred up again and again in each death, bringing him back, without any time for recovery, to the loss which brought his persona about and which he cannot escape. In Song 129 he presents a nightmarish memory of the death and funeral of one of his school-mates, F. J. Callahan. The moment he touched the dead friend's hand is pictured with eerie understatement:

> Thin as a sheet his mother came to him
> during the screaming evenings after he did it,
> touched F. J.'s dead hand.
> The parlour was dark, he was the first pall-bearer in,
> he gave himself a dare & then did it.

To experience the physical closeness of death in this way is treated almost like a flirtation, Henry giving 'himself a dare', and then like the contraction of a disease, the act of touching seeming to release uncontrollable demons ('riots for Henry the unstructured dead'). The hand itself is imbued with a significance for its effect on Henry ('but tender his cold hand, latent with Henry's fears'), alluding not simply to the haunting experiences that one finds in *In Memoriam*, for example, but to a sense of an uncontrollable inner psyche, which involves a less arcane field of imagery and reference but is equally disturbing in its presentation. The touching of the hand does

not release ghosts from some underworld but activates them in Henry's mind. While constructing a poetics of specifically psychological unease in each elegy, Berryman still makes room for his awareness of the literary irony which has preoccupied the tradition throughout, that is the position of the grieving poet who is advancing his career using the memory of his dead friend. Henry barely disguises his modicum of guilt at this circumstance, stressing the boy's virtue: 'That boy was good beyond his years, I he served at mass like Henry, he never did I one extreme thing wrong.' In addition he furnishes the poem with a self-reflexiveness that expresses the irony of elegy in talking of 'the older boy who died by the cottonwood I & now is to be planted, wise & slim, as part of Henry's history.' While vividly presenting us with images of the dead boy, Berryman accentuates the illusion of these images in the middle of presenting one very image, the line transmogrifying from simple history to literary metaphor by way of a central pivoting pun on 'planted'. As the reader is preparing to build a scene of the boy dying 'by the cottonwood', the expectation of his burial scene is teased to its furthest point to hear he is 'to be planted'. While this does suggest his burial, it allows the boy to become a literary figure, 'planted' on the page, 'wise', his mind and morality now unspoilt by his real history, '& slim', reduced to the body of the printed word, 'as part of Henry's history', not his family's, his country's nor Berryman's, simply a facet of the history of what is in any case a literary fiction.

The most celebrated of Berryman's elegies come in an intense sequence of twelve Songs in Book VI, various in tone and style, but summarizing and also breaking the norms of elegy in a *tour de force* of the poet's ultimately unresolved grief. From Song 146 to 158, Delmore Schwartz is mourned with an admixture of reminiscence, present-tense grief and unsettling phantasmagoria. In contradiction to Johnson's notorious complaint against elegy that 'Where there is leisure for fiction there is little grief', Berryman mingles harsh, worrying tones of grief with a musical lyricism which dedicatedly serves to heighten and define that grief, often dwelling on

the musicality of Schwartz's name itself.[17] Complementing this combination of directness with music is the mixture of inward and outward-looking mourning, the picture of Henry's mind in grief and that mind's reflections of Schwartz in memory which, through their associative origin, do not seem like discursiveness. Berryman enacts the empathy figured in the other elegies I have discussed, in this sequence by way of associating obituary-like reminiscences on Schwartz with Henry's manic expressions of distress. Schwartz's life, in this perspective, is not so much remembered but rather renewed in the mind of Henry. In the context of the poem, of course, the mind is the only place where Schwartz can exist, and this is all that can emerge in verse. The death of a loved one, in this case Schwartz, is indeed an opportunity for the poet to reflect on his vocation, but might be better seen as the transforming experience that brings the harshness of the real world into the sphere of Henry's imaginary existence, giving emotional difficulty and complexity to both. The reality of Schwartz's tragic loss becomes subsumed into Henry's incomplete and confused world-view, but makes Berryman's sense of elegy distinctively double-edged and aware of itself; this subsumation makes these elegies essentially illusory in their reference, yet the harshness of their unequivocal intrusion into the uncertain persona and opinions of Henry makes them emotionally startling without being out of place.

In Song 146 Berryman demonstrates this self-awareness in elegy by combining Henry's haunted vision with a deeply earnest acknowledgement of grief at Schwartz's loss, using the illusoriness of the former, ironically, to make the latter emotionally concrete:

> These lovely motions of the air, the breeze,
> tell me I'm not in hell, though round me the dead
> lie in their limp postures
> dramatizing the dreadful word *instead*
> for lively Henry, fit for debaucheries
> and bird of paradise vestures.

Henry's aliveness is his chief torment, according to his complaints in this Song. The

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[17] Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, 3vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), I, p. 163.

outward reality of the natural world is not hell, but for Henry his own survival while surrounded by the dead 'in their limp postures' constitutes his hell. He is not dead, but 'instead' he is free to indulge his earthly senses, 'fit for debaucheries.' This does not cheer Henry, rather he sees its destructiveness, and he is sympathetic to the state of those who surround him, wishing to be 'down with them | & down with Delmore specially'. The use of 'down' has a paradoxical connotation since it is uncertain as to where hell, as far as Henry is concerned, actually is. This ambiguity parallels the implicit uncertainty in Henry's temptation by death, since the voice of Delmore is particularly sinister, suggestive of a gothic haunting rather than emotional unease on Henry's part: 'came the Hebrew spectre, on a note of woe | and Join me O.' this seems confirmed in Henry's response to this exhortation:

> 'Down with them all!' Henry suddenly cried.
> Their deaths were theirs. I wait on for my own,
> I dare say it won't be long.
> I have tried to be them, god knows I have tried,
> but they are past it all, I have not done,
> which brings me to the end of this song.

The obstinacy of Henry in this stanza suggests a defence against crisis, against the self-destruction he sees as inevitable, in the defiant decision to 'wait on for my own' death. As in the elegy to F. J. Callahan, the Song exhibits the poet's manufacture of elegy, and achieves a positive tension by setting emotional directness against this explicit artifice. Henry pleads that as the surviving elegist he has tried to live up to the memory of those he has outlived, but finally accepts that 'they are past it all', they have no more art to create, whereas he has 'not done'; that is, he has either not reached their artistic heights or has not finished reaching heights of his own. This feeling is echoed in Song 159, where Henry again contemplates the end of his life as a welcomed submission:

> Maybe it's time
> to throw in my own hand.
> But there are secrets, I may yet—
> hidden in history & theology, hidden in rhyme—
> come on to understand.

In both Songs, the essence of the elegiac is defined by the circular situation of the

poet empathizing with the lost friend, to the extent of wishing death himself, but remaining resolutely alive in order to elegize and still express this death-wish, suggesting that subconsciously the desire is to understand, and to escape the pattern of loss in which Henry is permanently trapped. His task seems to become clearer to him through elegy, and that is simply to be an elegist, to understand death from the perspective of art and so make art which transforms the notion of elegy.

Henry's imprisonment within his fate is reiterated throughout this sequence. In Song 147 he is unable to escape the unease that the death of Schwartz has created in him: 'Henry's mind grew blacker the more he thought.' The Song is notable for its strange, unrelated similes, which give an atmosphere of sordid despair: 'He looked onto the world like the act of an aged whore.' The uncertain relation of the simile corresponds with the conflict between the inward and outward perspective of Berryman's elegiac poetics as mentioned earlier; the 'act of an aged whore', because it does not logically relate as a simile to the world or Henry looking at it, suggests an attachment to both. In the second stanza the same ambivalent likeness is created, but as in Song 146, the macabre is juxtaposed with the lyrical:

> He lookt on the world like the leavings of a hag.
> Almost his love died from him, any more.
> His mother & William
> were vivid in the same mail Delmore died.
> The world is lunatic. This is the last ride.
> Delmore, Delmore.

The juxtaposition also mimics the sense of physical and mental fragmentation evoked in the line 'He flung to pieces and they hit the floor', and the visceral reduction of Marcus Aurelius' edict 'All that is foul smell and blood in a bag'. Berryman's manipulation of idiom and grammar gives potentially over-used phrases with such persistent subject matter a new face. By inverting predictable grammatical sense he gives an impressionistic blur of meaning as in the line 'Almost his love died from him, any more'. As mentioned in Chapter One, the lyrical refrain of 'Delmore, Delmore' is at once a poeticization of Schwartz and yet simple threnody. Furthermore, it makes Delmore complicit in his own elegy, in all that remains of him,

his name and memory. It might be said that Delmore, as he exists in Henry's memory, is the elegist to himself; in the final stanza it is Schwartz performing the song:

> High in the summer branches the poet sang.
> Hís throat ached, and he could sing no more.
> All ears closed
> across the heights where Delmore & Gertrude sprang
> so long ago, in the goodness of which it was composed.
> Delmore, Delmore!

Overcoming the gruesome physicality which torments him, Henry's voice seeks lyrical consolation in 'singing' of Delmore's song. Once the song of Delmore has ended, the need to listen to anything else is extinguished, and 'All ears closed' across Brooklyn 'heights where Delmore & Gertrude sprang'.

The need of Berryman to express himself through elegy at this time, to use Henry's figure of grief as a poetic necessity over all other exigencies is depicted in Song 148, 'Glimmerings'. As Henry languishes in his thought he performs less and less academic work: 'Almost he lost interest in the 14 books part-done | in favour of insights fresh, a laziness in the sun, | rapid sketchings.' The 'laziness' is contradicted by the subject of the 'sketchings': 'a violent level on the drop of friendship.' The final stanza modulates into the minstrel Henry, addressing the gravediggers made busy by the death of so many of Henry's friends: 'Gravediggers all busy, Jelly, look what you done done | there died of late a great cat, a real boss cat | fallen from his prime.' Interestingly Berryman is not afraid to mention the decline in Schwartz's creativity, and it does not seem to diminish the esteem in which he is held, and furthermore seems to heighten the tragic nature of his death. Where elegy may have previously been guilty of euphemism through pastoral or distortion through panegyric, Berryman goes further even than, say Auden in his diminution of Freud in his elegy. In Song 150 he writes 'I'd bleed to say his lovely work improved, but it is not so.' In Song 157: 'his work downhill, I don't conceal from you, | ran and ran out.' This honesty is reconciled with the attempted consolation to the effect that his work can no longer go downhill; but in Song 148 this is undermined by the turmoil still endured by those still alive, such as Henry, and those who are born to live the same fate: 'I'm sorry for those

coming, I'm sorry for everyone | At least my friend is rid of that | for the present space-time.' Like Jarrell, he is out of the 'whole humiliating Human round'. This particular motif of consolation may not seem in essence very different from Shelley's 'He hath awakened from the dream of life.' Certainly it operates in a comparable sense, and indeed the life laid out in the *The Dream Songs* is, of course, a dream. Where it differs may be in its derivation; where Shelley consoles via a form of universal pessimism, disparaging earthly life, Berryman's Henry feels 'sorry for everyone' through his overt identification with the dead, as if he has already accepted his own death before it comes. Furthermore he can only say that Schwartz is rid of earthly misery 'for the present space-time', as if to say that this release is only within the context of the space-time of *The Dream Songs*, the private universe of Henry, who cannot say that Schwartz will escape further miseries in his new universe, of which Henry knows nothing. Like a stock comic character upon whom the weightiest dramatic irony is placed, Henry founders on his lack of knowledge of his own circumstances, his own incompleteness. At the same time he exerts his own power of irony by showing his pain in a most direct and human way, challenging his own artificiality, and proving himself to be not simply a cipher of Berryman but a literary device whose purpose is not simply post-modern jest but the expression of passionate grief and love, in spite of literary devices.

The final stanza of Song 149 employs such a device by conflating a traditional musical lament, Berryman's distinctive syntax, and a very twentieth-century trope which in its context becomes a pun:

> I imagine you have heard the terrible news,
> that Delmore Schwartz is dead, miserably & alone,
> in New York: he sang me a song
> 'I am the Brooklyn poet Delmore Schwartz
> Harms & the child I sing, two parents' torts'
> when he was young & gift-strong.

The hearing of news and the assumption that the listener has already heard give the twentieth-century feel, but in such a fantastical kind of poetry, the phrase 'I imagine' takes on a literalness that stresses Henry's helplessness as the product himself of

imagination. The news itself is blunt and unadorned, and inspires a reflective obituary composed of Schwartz's own self-announcement: 'Harms & the child I sing, two parents' torts'. This may be a pun on Dryden's translation of Aeneid ('Arms and the man I sing').[18] The stylized nature of these lines make it clear that Berryman is not quoting Schwartz himself but the outcome of his creative voice. In this instance, then, Berryman extends the motif of identification with the mourned into pretending to speak in the dead poet's voice (Dryden's translation continues 'forced by Fate, | And haughty Juno's unrelenting Hate', which would have great implied relevance to Berryman's voicing of the tragic Schwartz). Just as Berryman attempts to confront death in its actuality in Henry's confrontations with his father, so he mourns Schwartz with a morbid curiosity (again a modern, news-bound preoccupation) about the circumstances of his death; rather than sublimating the sordidness of his death into an elevation of the soul, he picks at its reality with discomfiting questions, as in Song 150: 'What final thought | solaced his fall to the hotel carpet, if any, | & the *New York Times*'s facts?' Similarly in Song 151, Henry is 'bitter & bleary' and feels compelled to confront and conquer the most unsavoury aspects of the death: 'I need to hurry this out before I forget | which I will never He fell on the floor | outside a cheap hotel room[...]His good body lay unclaimed three days.' Song 152 exhibits an awareness of the continuing question of the power of the poet genuinely to grieve, and Berryman seems to answer this with a disclaimer, apologizing in advance for any poor articulation, as Schwartz is bid 'a raggeder farewell | than at any time my grief would have desired'. Berryman uses a deliberately clumsy yet evocative construction, 'raggeder', rather than 'more ragged', as a way of proving the point of his elegy — to replicate the deterioration of the mourner that loss brings about. The rawness of his elegies mimics the mental state of the mourner, rather than just having the transformative, cathartic quality of the elegy of pure memorial and symbolism. Part of this mimicry of the actual state can be seen in the fact that in Song 152 Henry attempts to say 'farewell' to Schwartz, noting the poem's timing as the day of

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[18] John Dryden, 'First Book of the Aeneis', *The Works of John Dryden* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), vol. v, p.343, l. 1-2.

Schwartz's memorial, and clearly hoping he can draw a line under his grief; but in the following Song, he expels much of the rage held in reserve in an overflowing rage against God:

> I'm cross with god who has wrecked this generation.
> First he seized Ted, then Richard, Randall, and now Delmore.
> In between he gorged on Sylvia Plath.
> That was a first rate haul.

He continues to note those spared this wreckage as 'fools I could number with a kitchen knife', and implicitly includes himself in this group. The use of a 'kitchen knife' to do this numbering seems an ambiguous threat, partly suggesting that Henry wishes he was in the positionto do the wrecking rather than the numbering. This threat also seems potentially to turn inwards, if Henry is to be included in the list of fools, and this has a resonance with the line in the second stanza, 'I hang, and will not be part of it.' This seems simultaneously defiant and complaining; it initially suggests that Henry refuses to be part of his dead generation and by staying alive will confirm this (the wrong type of immortality); but it may also be saying that Henry can never be one of those he praises, and even in death, when 'I hang', he 'will not be part of it'. Berryman combines the anger at loss and fear for the fate of the living in an intensely complex and compact whole, whose diction is redolent of its meaning even at its most difficult moments, as in Song 154, where knots of disconnected and misplaced syntax mirror the decline in Schwartz's talents and the fragmentation of his marriage to Gertrude: 'even that marriage fell on days | were lonely and ended.' in the final stanza he describes in a more straightforward narrative an incident typifying Schwartz's fragmentation:

> to my house in Providence
> at 8 a. m. in a Cambridge taxi,
> which he had wait, later he telephoned
> at midnight from New York, to bring my family
> to New York, leaving my job.

This narrative continues in Song 155, as Henry complains that 'I can't get him out of my mind, out of my mind'; the echo within the line represents the uncontrollable echoing of memories in his mind, the reminiscence of 155 repeating some of what is

mentioned in the previous Song, this time in a more bleakly witty tone:

> He drove up to my house in Providence
> ho ho at 8 a. m. in a Cambridge taxi
> and told it to wait.
>
> He walked my living-room, & did not want breakfast
> or even coffee, or even a drink.
> He paced, I'd say Sit down,
> it makes me nervous, for a moment he'd sit down,
> then pace. After an hour or so *I* had a drink.

The tone here is subdued, yet tragic in its observance of one example of Schwartz's deranged state. The tone becomes more luxuriant and mournful as Henry's reminiscence becomes broader and more abstract: 'I remember his electrical insight as the young man, | his wit & passion, gift, the whole young man | alive with surplus love.' The emotional force of these closing lines, remembering Schwartz at his height, throws the tragedy of his madness in the previous lines into starker relief. The strength of the elegy lies in its use of memory, one depressing, haunting the mind, the other seeking to give a picture of its subject for posterity with lyricism but without an overly mythologizing approach. The themes of regeneration and fateful birth that shadow through the poem as a whole are clearly central to the contemplation of the fate of Schwartz, and this brings the identification further into focus, as Henry's fate and loss becomes aligned with that of Schwartz in Song 156, where Henry again morbidly reviews the details of his death: 'There are all the problems to be sorted out, | the fate of the soul, what it was all about | during its being, and whether he was drunk | at 4 a. m. on the wrong floor too.' Henry talks here initially about the 'fate of *the* soul', not specifically Schwartz's, hinting that this may be applied to himself; the same can probably be said for the subsequent lines, 'Almost my oldest friend should never have been born | to this terrible end.' Berryman uses the end of the line to partially pun on 'born', which seems unequivocal until qualified by the conjoined following phrase which implies the word in the sense 'borne', echoing Song 1 in wondering that the world can 'bear & be' what Henry has to say.' In his attempt at a final farewell in Song 157, Henry sets Schwartz alongside a series of historic figures who 'line that avenue | where I will gladly walk', the paradise populated by geniuses

to whom he aspires. Henry seeks to shirk the ghost of Schwartz, willing it to recover his youthful achievements: 'flame may his glory in that other place.' The use of such a euphemism as 'that other place' seems, in the context of Berryman's sense of elegy, a desperate search for consolation, and the closing lines seem, as with the lines of 156 discussed above, addressed as much to the self as the object: 'sit, sit, I & recover, & be whole.' Surely Henry's most urgent requirements are to 'recover, & be whole', and only through completion of and distance from his mourning can he come to this resolution. But the traditional reconciliation does not fully arise in *The Dream Songs*, and yet nor does Henry fully accept his fate to elegize perpetually; Berryman makes definitive the torment of the melancholic in poetry, who is in endless conflict with his own desires to live happily or to die as a result of the former's failure. For Berryman the elegy is not the praise of an external soul, nor simply the expression of sadness at its loss, but an examination of one's own, in those recesses where the image of another exists; and such is his passion that the images of selves that reside contiguously in the imagination become conflated on the page. In this sense Berryman is crucially redefining elegy, setting up new conventions reflective of his zeitgeist, where elegiac empathy is expressed not only through fears for one's own soul, but arises out of fundamental uncertainties about what the soul (and the soul of a poet) represents, and how its loss can ever be understood or accepted.

Chapter Five
'He has been known to mourn': *The Dream Songs* as Elegy

I want now to look at the relationship between *The Dream Songs*' specific elegies and the rest of the Songs in the sequence. I intend to show that ultimately *The Dream Songs* is not simply a context for elegy but that even when not memorializing, the essence of the poem is to present a persona struggling to overcome, and being overcome by, recurrent grief. The number of Songs that can be considered as specific elegies is not as great as it seems, just as Henry is not actually as omnipresent as one might think; eighty-five of the Songs have no reference to Henry at all, and others in only the most cursory manner. But even when Henry's name is not mentioned he seems to present a spectral presence thoughout the work, and similarly, although the poet mourns the loss of a fellow writer less often than we might think, the atmosphere of inescapable doom (even if challenged by acerbic, gallows humour) and impending tragedy is pervasive. The broad topical range of *The Dream Songs* allows Berryman the chance to trawl through the whole of contemporary American society, and his own personal life, bringing up subjects as they arrive in the life of the poet, and representing them in the life of Henry. Rather than a set of formal elegies, those in *The Dream Songs* become part of a kind of diary of Henry's achievements, losses and opinions, cropping up with depressing regularity as one famous writer after another comes to a tragic end. This method of ordering the elegies gives them a greater semblance of truth to the poet's, or Henry's experience, though they are not arranged even as strictly as a diary, marking the day or the week of each new death. But since *The Dream Songs* were written, to some extent, in the sense that a diary is written — that is they cover over ten years in Berryman's life recalling the major events of that period by and large in sequence — the continuity of emotion when looking from one elegy to the next has a genuine accumulation of sorrow. But when read in no particular order, as a collection of lyrics, it could be, and has been, argued that

Berryman was merely punctuating the ravings of Henry with an interlude of solemnity in his use of elegies. However, the language of the Songs is such that solemnity is not isolated in order that an elegy can be properly expressed: the elegies do not stand alone amid the joking, self-pitying voice of Henry but are caught up in his hysterical ramblings. Of course *The Dream Songs* are not of one tone, but the elegies are not singled out or excepted from whatever voice is passing through Henry at the time, whether minstrel, boozy academic or raging, misunderstood son, or whatever else.

Moreover this is not to say that Berryman does not modulate the tone of his verse to accommodate his subject matter, for he does precisely that; what is worth noting in fact is the extent to which he does accommodate, by writing what seem remarkably jarring passages whose tone is nevertheless consistent, paradoxically, with their context. The qualities of the Songs as a whole prove that Berryman is always in control of the tone of his work, and is simply keen to introduce tonal dislocation for very specific poetic effects. For example, Song 76 contains a great deal of whimsical humour, yet the central subject matter is the suicide of Henry's father, framed, in the second stanza, by minstrel banter in the first and third. Lines six and seven, running across two stanzas ('— *If* life is a handkerchief sandwich, | in a modesty of death I join my father'), would seem an inappropriate juxtaposition, putting Henry's musing on a faintly absurd metaphor of life as a 'handkerchief sandwich' next to his willingness to 'join my father' in suicide. Yet where the tone here ought to seem awkward if not in bad taste, it creates a particularly touching — if bizarre — moment of companionship. Similarly the tone Berryman uses in elegies can be equally disconcerting, such as the jauntiness of Song 324, to William Carlos Williams, or Song 219 to Wallace Stevens. Henry expresses an authentically uneven reaction to the death of others and the prospect of his own. As in Song 146 ('his heart is elsewhere, down with them') Henry's envy of the dead pervades the Songs at all tonal turns. Tone is always rigorously controlled, then, but often a seemingly inappropriate voice is made to sound correct by virtue of the poet's complete empathy with his subject. The uniformity of this use of tone, that is, its uniform unpredictability, makes the elegiac

Songs an integral and crucial element of the poem, not a diversion or interlude, as some critics have suggested (Robert Hahn claims that the interpolation of elegies is a 'disingenuous effort to vary this landscape [of other Dream Songs] with monuments to other poets')[1] On the contrary, I would suggest that the elegies are part and parcel of *The Dream Songs*, they are subject to the same changes of mood as the rest of the poem. The Songs of course are not merely about the death of friends, and Douglas Dunn identifies the broad scope of the Songs beyond sole forms of verse: 'The Dream Songs is undoubtedly haunted by elegiac feeling. But Berryman's own play with Henry[...]ought to complicate purely elegiac or religious definitions of the work.'[2] I want to show that elegiac feeling is in fact crucial and stems from the very character of Henry, who personifies this feeling while complicating it.

One of the distinctive qualities of *The Dream Songs* is its unselfconscious literary name-dropping; that is, not just remarking on celebrated friends and colleagues, but alluding to figures of all ages of literature without any obvious anxiety that the poet will be ostentatiously showing off knowledge. Moreover, he often has the ability to humanize certain figures of literature, to draw them with ease into the colloquial flow of Dream Song diction: 'I saw the point of Loeb | at last' (95); 'Mostly he knew the ones he would not follow | into their burning systems | or polar systems, Wittgenstein being boss, | Augustine general manager' (207). The posts of boss and general manager seem mostly reminiscent of American sports teams; to give literary figures like these such appellations seems a typically colloquial Berryman stroke, as with his habit of referring to his favourite works of literature as being 'hot'.[3]

To be more specific, however, I want to ask what the language of *The Dream Songs* is actually made up of, how it communicates the poet's meaning, and how the poet is prepared to use the same kind of language to complain about his mail as he does to complain about the death of a friend. The first answer to the last question is

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[1] Hahn, p. 117.
[2] Douglas Dunn, 'Gaiety and Lamentation: The Defeat of John Berryman.' *Encounter*, 43 (1974), 72-77 (p. 72).
[3] Philip Levine, 'Mine Own John Berryman', in *Recovering Berryman* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 25.

that, of course, he does not use the same language, but it can seem that way at first. The particularly deceptive aspect of the Songs is that their apparently jumbled, unprepared and chaotic mangling of language and tone seems to the first-time reader artless at best or wilfully obscure at worst. The key to solving this problem can be tackled by realizing it is a problem of perception. It may be compared to one's inability to understand the speaker of a foreign language; initial impatience ought to be replaced by a careful ear and memory, and prolonged exposure inevitably breeds familiarity, to the extent that once immersed in the language of the Songs, it is hard to remember or appreciate one's initial confusion. This is perhaps why a poet such as Frost or Lowell can prosper, relatively speaking, while Berryman remains somewhat outside the mainstream of the poetry world. While their diction is clean, so to speak, and without so many difficult linguistic edges, their final meaning, the ultimate purpose of their poetics, may be as unfathomable as Berryman's. But for the casual reader, the medium is the key to the message. Where Lowell's voice, in *Life Studies* at least, is conversational, reflective, Berryman's is frantic, flitting from one subject to the next, while being wilfully ungrammatical. Robert Pinsky notes that the strange and slang-derived elements of the voice are not there just for some comic effect, but to communicate meaning, and to give a human as well as a knowledgeable academic voice: 'Perhaps the most important point to be made is that the colloquial words and gag-words are not the words for which the extravagant style provides a kind of license or passport. Rather, the colloquial words help the syntax, the gags, and the personae in a general effort to admit another kind of phrase [...] just as in ordinary talk tough-slangy taglines such as "all that jazz" often excuse and qualify a phrase the speaker fears may seem too elevated or pretentious.'[4] The task for the reader is to choose how to approach this purposive collision of the rarefied and the colloquial. In his many voices Berryman is capable of satisfying various creative impulses. As with Pound or Eliot, the urge to attempt lengthy and thoroughgoing exegesis of every curious line of the Songs is hard to resist, and while this is obviously worthwhile to some extent, it

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[4] Robert Pinsky, *The Situation of Poetry* (Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 23, in *Berryman's Understanding*, p. 187.

proceeds from the assumption that whatever solutions to supposed problems of semantic, literary or personal reference one arrives at will be the definitive answer to the question the poet has posed. Yet the reason that good poetry survives through decades and more is that there is never a definitive solution, and a poem cannot be solved like a mathematical puzzle. Song 3, for example, has many puzzling and obscure lines, but does it really mean that we have solved the poem if we establish the initial inspiration for the writing of these lines? When a voice says '—I'm not so young but not so very old', does it aid greatly our understanding of Berryman's intentions to know who 'screwed-up, lovely 23' really is, or was? What is worth examination, however, is the puzzle that is going on purely within the poem, without an external referent, in the remarkable language of the final stanza:

> Rilke was a *jerk*.
> I admit his griefs & music
> & titled spelled all-disappointed ladies.
> A threshold worse than the circles
> where the vile settle & lurk,
> Rilke's. As I said,—

Berryman seems to be saying any number of different things about Rilke and about poetry here, hinging his ambivalence on some ingeniously positioned verbs. 'I admit his griefs & music' suggests that the poet is about to say something to the effect of describing what his griefs and music did, that is, admitting that his 'griefs & music' were powerful elements of his work. But because there is no 'that' immediately following 'admit', the phrase simultaneously suggests its alternative meaning, of directly admitting the griefs and music into his heart, or accepting their worth at least. But then 'griefs & music' may be part of a list of three things: 'his griefs & music | & titled.' This begs the question of what is meant by Rilke's 'titled'? Is this a deliberate misspelling, referring to Rilke's poems as titles, a pejorative diminution of their worth which would fit with the opening insult of the stanza? Or is 'titled' separate from the list of 'griefs & music', and instead meant to suggest that Rilke's title represents his fame as a poet, and his ability to entrance, or bind in his spell 'all-disappointed ladies'? It may also be a reference to the aristocratic milieu, and its 'titled' ladies, in

which Rilke was noted for moving. The multiple meaning of 'spell' gives it a punning quality on the problem of 'titled', since misspelling in this instance leads to variety of meaning, where it might usually lead just to misunderstanding. The variant, archaic meanings of 'spell' may be brought into play, also, in its sense as simply a narrative or tale, without any inherent magical quality. But also in that sense of an act of bewitching, the spell comes notably as a kind of verse, or form of rhythmic words. There is an additional North American meaning of 'to spell' being to take the place of another at a place of work or elsewhere, so that Rilke may be enchanting 'all-disappointed ladies' or putting himself in their place. Further, the phrase 'all-disappointed ladies' seems to rely on its hyphen to dispel what could otherwise have led to countless further interpretations. As it is, this seems to suggest women disappointed by all, or everything, or is at least saying that all of them are disappointed, even with the hyphen included. The mere presence of 'all' in the phrase suggests inclusivity without directly pronouncing it. This inclusiveness appears to reflect badly upon Rilke, as it implies that his 'griefs & music' were a device for enchanting all women. The poet's disapprobation at Rilke seems clear from the way he places his 'threshold' among the lowest of Dante's rings: 'A threshold worse than the circles | where the vile settle & lurk, Rilke's.'

It is tempting to suggest that once Berryman had established a distinctive voice for Henry, he would become a character frequently imitated, and indeed Philip Toynbee attempts such an imitation to dubious critical effect. In his essay 'Berryman's Songs'[5] of 1965 he places two of his own 'Henry' stanzas amidst three other genuine Dream Song excerpts. I would suggest that any Berryman scholar could easily pick out the imposters, but even without the aid of such familiarity, the reader would suspect that Toynbee has missed the point. From that scholar's point of view, it is easy enough to note that his rhythm and pacing is all wrong, and his 'Henry-isms' unconvincing. Berryman would not have a line like 'He was his own light, or something glowing' (one of Toynbee's) that strains the iambic so awkwardly, its

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[5] Philip Toynbee, 'Berryman's Songs,' *Encounter*, 24 (1965), 76-78 (p. 76).

stresses in all the wrong places. If Berryman deviates from the kind of strict metering by which his early verse can be distinguished, it is replaced by an often radical, but always natural, new pattern, more akin to Hopkins-style stressing. Moreover, it is not merely Toynbee's imitations that are flawed, but also his criticism that exposes his superficial reading of the poems. He makes an elementary error of failing to discern the speakers in the Songs' dialogue, believing that '"Mr. Bones" [...] is a secondary character with whom he [Henry] engages at times in sinister and ludicrous fragments of dialogue.'[6] Close reading of a single Song containing such dialogue will show that Mr Bones and Henry are one and the same, in dialogue with another, unnamed friend. This basic mistake undermines pretty much everything else Toynbee has to say. What I intended to illustrate with this point is that the apparently spontaneous, unconscious overflow of language one comes across in *The Dream Songs* is not necessarily as spontaneous as it appears, and what Toynbee appears to have taken to be the doggerel of a deranged alcoholic is more accurately the work of a serious academic of broad learning and with an acute ear for tight rhythm and colloquial speech. This is coupled, undoubtedly, with the instinctive sense of what to write, in what order, which cannot be learnt by rote, but which nevertheless does not travel unmediated from subconscious to pen, bypassing the poet's intellect. Berryman even makes excuses for the role of the subconscious in his prefatory note, but in doing so appears keen to draw attention to it: 'Many opinions and errors in the Songs are to be referred not to the character Henry, still less to the author, but to the title of the work.'[7] The impulses and inspirations that led Berryman to arrive at such a voice are as varied and eventful as his biography, but the influence of the dream state cannot be underestimated, not only as a key to the apparent but assiduously contrived disorder of much of the Songs' language but also being emblematic of the uncertain nature of their subject matter, that is, Henry's current life, the extent of his awareness and the authority of memory. Berryman seems to allow for Henry's mistakes as part not just of dreams, but as part

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[6] ibid.

[7] John Berryman, *The Dream Songs* (Note), (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1969; London: Faber & Faber, 1990) p. vi.

of memory, connected to the way memories change as one gets older; recollections falter or become confused, or else current situations necessitate or inspire re-evaluation of memories. Henry's memories of childhood and his attitudes to his father seem constantly controlled by events in the present. But like a dream, even Henry does not seem entirely aware of the implications of what he is witness to. The tension of this struggle to find some definitive meaning is what drives the poem — and the reader — forward. In Song 101, the poet describes an 'extraordinary vivid dream', but one which appears to the reader to have no meaningful import at all, yet as dreams often do, the emotion it conveys is far greater than the events it portrays:

> I can't go into the meaning of the dream
> except to say a sense of total LOSS
> afflicted me thereof:
> an absolute disappearance of continuity & love
> and children away at school, the weight of the cross,
> and everything is what it seems.

The inexplicable sadness Henry feels after this dream is not explained, nor is there any key to the poet's motives in presenting the dream thus, except in the possible evasiveness of the first line quoted: 'I can't go into the meaning of the dream.' Does this mean that Henry is unwilling or unable to explain it? Perhaps he is implying that if he had time and space he would go into every aspect of its significance (as mentioned earlier, Berryman indeed analysed his dreams in great detail[8]) but life is too short to describe anything except the feeling of immense gloom it has engendered in him, and that, in a sense, is more important than the specific meaning of the facts of the dream. This is a useful analogue to the reading of the Songs as a whole. Sometimes an examination of the facts and references of the poem is less important than the sense of what the poet is saying through the medium of these facts. Once again, the identification of the characters in Song 101 ('Betty & Douglas, and Don') would be less elucidatory than simply digesting the stanza which expresses Henry's 'sense of total LOSS', his sense of 'an absolute disappearance of continuity & love', a disappearance traceable perhaps to the loss of Henry's father, and the replacement of

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[8] See *Life*, pp. 247-8.

him in the dream with 'Mother' in the realms of 'a lunatic asylum'. The sadness felt by children being 'away at school' accords with the discontinuity that sending one's children away to learn represents for Henry; and the 'weight of the cross' refers less perhaps to any ego-driven sense of Henry's or Berryman's identification with Christ than to the weight of the world experienced in memories of a childhood, a Catholic education, and the subsequent feelings of adult Henry, 'cross with god.' The final, deceptively straightforward line may be a significant corollary of this theme of the Songs as a dream. The ultimate tragedy that befalls Henry is that he cannot solve the problems of his troubled existence through the interpretation of his dreams, and that the 'opinions and errors' amid which he exists cannot be corrected, since in the poem, dreams and reality are as insoluble and unknowable as each other. There is no puzzle to be deciphered, and no therapy can disentangle Henry's 'trying to put things over'(Song 1), because 'everything is what it seems.' The secondary, consequent sense the line suggests is that dreams and reality are not only unknowable, but interchangeable. For Henry forgets — or rather Berryman makes him forget — that he is just a figment of another's imagination. Since he exists only as a work of literature, he cannot 'go into the meaning of the dream' because it is a dream of which he himself is a part, and that is just part of a more wide-ranging dream, which is the dream of Henry's life. So 'everything is what it seems' in *The Dream Songs* because nothing in the poem is either a dream or reality, since both are interchangeable; everything (that is real) is simultaneously what it seems (its dream-state equivalent) and vice-versa. So the unsolveable puzzle of the Songs, if there is one, lies in the impossibility of anything therein being able to relate, ultimately, to the real world in any literal sense. All the terms of reference are activated by psychological analogy and metaphor.

In a parallel sense, the poems that deal specifically with the elegiac are thematically situated not by the external events and characters they relate but primarily by the allusions to an elegiac sense in the rest of the Songs. The elegies of the Songs are given their true weight by the accumulated sense throughout the poem

that mourning is, so to speak, Henry's vocation, and that his preoccupation with death draws out the elegiac sense through repeated disparate frames of reference for the language of mourning, accordant with the literary diversity of the Songs. An example of this may be found in Song 382. Its resonance with Song 1 suggests that its position near the end of the sequence is more purposive than incidental. The opening line 'At Henry's bier let something fall out well' refers back to 'Thereafter nothing fell out as it might or ought'. Henry is hoping that after the irreversible losses he might experience a final fall that compensates for the 'departures' he has had to endure. The fall might have a literal image, at once comical and ominous, that his coffin falls from the bier, into the grave, 'out' of the world, 'well'. Like so many other Songs it changes pace halfway through, but since the poet has been so far giving instructions the change seems more deliberately orchestrated:

> until the Dancer comes, in a short short dress
> hair black & long & loose, dark dark glasses,
> uptilted face,
> pallor & strangeness, the music changes
> to 'Give!' & 'Ow!' and how! the music changes,
> she kicks a backward limb
>
> on tiptoe, pirouette, & she is free
> to the knocking music, sails, dips, & suddenly
> returns to the terrible gay
> occasion hopeless & mad, she weaves, it's hell,
> she flings to her head a leg, bobs, all is well,
> she dances Henry away.

This image of the dancer seems to owe a certain debt of influence to the *danse macabre*, and in fact the tradition has implications for much of the thematic force of *The Dream Songs*. Typically represented is a confrontation or dialogue between a living member of society and their underworld counterpart depicted as a skeleton, leading them by the hand, or more notably performing a dance or playing a musical instrument. Marcia Collins notes the paradox of the fact that the skeleton is so animated:

> At its most basic level the Dance is merely the visual opposition of the appearance of the living and the dead. The encounter emphasizes the physical differences between the living body and its dead double — a decayed soul-less corpse which is animated by some unnatural liveliness [...] Contrary to the solemnity of the occasion, Death is dancing and one feels mocking. Death

> seems to scorn men's worldly struggles for status and wealth, indicating that these count for nothing at the time of death.[9]

This ties in specifically with certain elements of Song 382 and with *The Dream Songs* as a whole. While the dancer of 382 is not a skeleton, but a woman in modern dress ('in a short short dress | hair black & long & loose, dark dark glasses') she is still an unsettlingly animated presence amid the solemnity of the occasion with 'everybody's mood | subdued, subdued'. Her deathly origin however is suggested by her 'pallor & strangeness'. Henry's instruction in line 2 'enter there none who somewhat has to sell' suggests he shares Death's scorn for wealth, or perhaps in his case the struggle for fame, since one who 'somewhat has to sell' rather than having 'something' to sell suggests one who rather reluctantly has to sell, has to be popular to match the achievements of those he admires. The crucial reference to the *danse macabre* is also a reference to the starting point of the Songs: 'she dances Henry away.' Like the falling motif, this echoes Song 1 in its line 'It was the thought that they thought | they could *do* it made Henry wicked & *away*'[my emphasis on 'away']. The positioning of 'away' in Song 1 implies a sense of Henry being astray, away from the conscience of his peers, away from a normal life, above all, 'away' meaning towards a doomed existence; so that when the Dancer 'dance[s] Henry away' it is the dance to which Henry has looked forward and which he has feared all his 'life'. Moreover it is a dance not to solemn music but to twentieth-century sounds, the interjections 'Give!' and 'Ow!' suggestive of jazz or rock and roll; this brings together much of the salient themes and the cultural material of the Songs — the ambivalence towards death, and its articulation through the musical setting of many Songs and the work as whole suggested of course by the title, and centrally the affinity with black culture (which will be discussed at more length in the next chapter), the confrontation in the Dance of Death between the solemn living and the lively dead uncannily mirrored by the dialogue between Henry as Mr *Bones* and his anonymous friend. Marcia Collins further mentions a German strand of the *danse macabre* tradition, *Der Toten Dantz*

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[9] Marcia Collins, *The Dance of Death in Book Illustration* (Catalog to an exhibit in the Ellis Library of the University of Missouri: Columbia, 1978) pp. 13-14.

which compounds this correspondence: 'Emphasis is given to the figure of Death who is portrayed as a trickster or a Spielmann (minstrel). Playing musical instruments and cavorting, the dead are humorous, active figures who actually seem to be dancing.'[10] His friend is often the rational counterpoint to Henry's wilder and more manic impulses, his urges towards mortal pleasures, as in Song 4 ('There ought to be a law against Henry. | —Mr Bones: there is.') and comparably the dancing figure of Death is an end to earthly wealth and fame. Song 382 is itself more of a dream than the set of instructions it begins as; it becomes a present-tense narrative, viewed from the outside by Henry, who has already left his body and coffin and yet is observing the Dancer dancing some version of Henry away.

This song may be usefully compared with Berryman's poem 'The Poet's Final Instructions', from his small 1958 collection *His Thought Made Pockets & the Plane Buckt*:

> Dog-tired, suisired, will now my body down
> near Cedar Avenue in Minneap,
> when my crime comes. I am blazing with hope.
> do me glory, come the whole way across town.

The beginnings of a Dream Song idiom can be seen in this first stanza, and although the tone of the poem lacks the deeper accumulative resonances of Song 382 in its context, its strangeness is enough to make the reader linger and attempt to puzzle it out, such as its opening phrases, 'Dog-tired, suisired.' This portmanteau coinage seems to mean sired by suicide, which suggests the fate of Henry, born when his father took his own life, born out of that trauma. The perennial, inexplicable guilt expressed by Henry is presented here as commonplace, accommodated; the poet refers to his death as an inevitable sin: 'when my crime comes.' Even outside the elegiac scope of the Songs, Berryman seems to have shaped his poetics around the guilt of the mourner. As a re-converted Catholic, Berryman knew that suicide was a sin, a crime. The poem is far more a set of instructions than the metaphysical daydream of Song 382. There is also a note of satirized snobbery about one's final

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[10] Collins, p. 26.

wishes: 'I couldn't rest from hell just anywhere,' yet the poet mocks the surroundings he intends for his body:

> Drop here, with honour due, my trunk & brain
> among the passioning of my countrymen
> unable to read, rich, proud of their tags
> and proud of me.

'Proud of their tags' suggests stereotypical people happy to be so, or in a more morbid sense proud to be dead — referring to the tags on the toes of corpses in the morgue. 'Proud of me' is surely ironic since these countrymen are 'unable to read', that is unable to read poetry. There is similar sarcasm in the remark 'Do me glory, come the whole way across town', implying that the poet's fame, or 'glory' is so puny in the real world that coming 'the whole way across town' is a major service. Berryman's concern with the funereal and the elegiac is manifest, then, outside of even the body of *The Dream Songs*, although the tone is much changed, and while here the atmosphere is of black humour the later work develops a more worried and desperate tone, not without wit, as in the Songs discussed in Chapter Four, 129 about the funeral of F. J. Callahan, or the penultimate Song, 384, where Henry enters his father's grave, and Song 91, discussed on page 141 of this study, where Henry is 'Lazarus with a plan'. In Song 269, we see Henry's mortality as a regular journey: 'Acres of spirits every single day I shook headed Henry towards his friendly grave.' The 'Acres of spirits' seem to echo the limp-postured dead of Song 146, urging Henry to join them. Again, Berryman's syntax arouses complex meaning; does 'headed' apply to Henry as an adjective, meaning intelligent or simply conscious, or is it part of an elided verb construction, in which the spirits both 'shook' and 'headed' Henry towards 'his friendly grave'. In another passage of apparently elaborate self-mockery, Berryman constructs a Whitman-like universalizing scheme of Henry's demise, only for Henry to fail to understand it:

> With each wave
> further he vanished, while the great sky grew grey
> never to wake again while
>
> the visible universe grows older, while
> the onflying stars out to my edges sail—

the edges of what?

'Wave' is suggestive of drowning, especially given references elsewhere in the Songs to Henry's death, as in 143, 'He was going to swim out, with me, forevers.' It also gives a sense of someone waving, while going away, disappearing. Henry's disappearance is encouraged again in the final stanza using the recurrent image of the tree as a place of safety and solace, as it is in Song 1: 'They say now Henry's love is well beyond Henry | & advise the poor man back into the tree.'

Song 16 strengthens the theme of Henry as an animal, frequently a 'Pussycat', or as a constituent representative of something else:

> Henry's pelt was put on sundry walls
> where it did much resemble Henry and
> them persons was delighted.
> Especially his long & glowing tail
> by all them was admired, and visitors.
> They whistles: This is *it*!
>
> Golden, whilst your frozen daiquiris
> whir at midnight, gleams on you his fur
> & silky & black.
> Mission accomplished, pal.
> My molten yellow & moonless bag,
> drained, hangs at rest.
>
> Collect in the cold depths barracuda. Ay,
> in Sealdah Station some possessionless
> children survive to die.
> The Chinese Communes hum. Two daiquiris
> withdrew into the corner of the gorgeous room
> and one told the other a lie.

'Henry's pelt was put on sundry walls' brings out the idea of the totem animal and the wearing of its skin as discussed by Freud, which tallies well with Berryman's themes of fatherhood and generation, the guilt and ambivalence this involves symbolized in the wearing of the skin of your father | God | creator. In addition the stanza mocks the 'pelt' as a thing of rare beauty, an *objet d'art* pretentiously admired, and a specimen for morbid curiosity. Polite society sips daiquiris and admires Henry's 'long & glowing tail'. The artificiality of Henry's existence is emphasized by the image of his pelt as a piece of art, and it refers back to the process of literary posterity with which the elegies deal, where the artist becomes his art. Song 16 deals reflexively with this

notion; the artist is totemized, his remains are observed as a trophy, but they do not constitute his being (Henry's pelt 'did much resemble Henry'). But Henry here is talking about 'Henry's pelt' and its illusory relation to Henry: an imaginary figure commenting on the imaginariness of his skin as a representation of himself. At the same time this typifies the use of nightmarish imagery embedded in the oppressively physical, as Henry contemplates his skin empty of his body: 'My molten yellow & moonless bag | drained, hangs at rest.' The Song connects the surreally personal with the social as a commentary on characterization, referring to the Sealdah Station in Calcutta, where East Pakistanis were repatriated, as an ironic contrast with the drinking of daiquiris; there is a textually implicit disdain for these drinkers, who are metonymically reduced to their drinks in the final stanza to define their characters. The last stanza puts 'Ay' at the end of the first line as a semantic pivot, a buffer for an ironic collision of scenes; a nautical expression to refer to barracuda fishing and a quasi-Biblical rhetorical connection to the depiction of poverty at Sealdah and China. The children in the Sealdah Station 'survive to die'. As the Songs progress, this becomes Henry's fate, and his detachment from real life is set out here as both social and psychological: he is outside 'Henry', outside his own body, outside society, and with the suggestion of Henry's 'drained' skin, 'at rest' as 'Mission accomplished', he is outside of life. The fatalism of this is reiterated in Song 137. There is also more fragmentation, and paradox; the Song describes insomnia but in the midst of a dream, suggesting a waking hallucination. Textually, this notion refers back to the title: Henry's whole utterance and existence is a dream. This Song enunciates the uncertainty of Henry's testament to this, his fragmentation:

> I don't understand this dream,
> said Henry to himself in slippers: why,
> things are going to pieces.

Henry perceives not only the shattering of his perception but of the world around him independently of that perception: 'things are going to pieces' in the colloquial sense, echoing Yeats's 'The Second Coming': 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold | Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.' The apocalyptic feeling engendered by

Berryman is aligned with Henry's elegiac visions of the dead throughout later Songs, line six here ('heroes' bodies, in circles, thin, | collapsing') echoing 'round me the dead | lie in their limp postures' (146). This leads indirectly to a question of religious doubt: 'How is it faith finds ever matters rough?', meaning, sarcastically, how could there ever be a case to question religion. The question is contextualized by the horrors of Cambodia, implying therefore that religious faith is essentially a case of not asking questions. In response to this blasphemous feeling, Henry accepts his fate as a sinner who, in taking on the sins of the world, goes to pieces himself: 'My honey must flow of in the great rains, | as all the parts thereto do thereto belong.' His 'parts' ultimately 'belong[ing]' to the elements, Henry's final disintegration is foreshadowed here in the prospect of his journey 'toward the last love, | the last dream, the last song.' In the sense that Henry is living in a dream himself, the last dream constitutes his extinction, and while Christopher Ricks has perhaps taken Songs such as this to support his view that *The Dream Songs* is a theodicy, I would argue that Henry does not simply accept the will of God — in fact he rages against it a great deal — but sees himself in the deaths of his friends, and in 'heroes' bodies', and his reconciliation is not with God but with these sequestered parts of himself, lost to the world in 'the great rains.' Henry's hope is surely that at the end of his Songs he will rejoin, in death, his lost souls.[11] The plasticity of the Songs' use of personae to generate new conceptions of the fate of the artist is exemplified again in Song 114, which uses minstrel language (which will be discussed at more length in Chapter Six) to align fate personified with Henry's blackface alter ego and his friend. In the Song, Henry, himself an imagined persona, imagines time as a series of personae:

> Mr Past being no friends of mine,
> all them around: Sir Future Dubious,
> calamitous & grand:
> I can no foothold here; wherefore I pines
> for Dr Present, who won't thrive to us
> hand over neither hand.

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[11] 'Like all good elegies (*Lycidas* as well as *In Memoriam*), the Dream Songs can't but be a theodicy. Berryman's poem, for all its fractures and its fractiousness, is as intensely a theodicy —"a vindication of divine providence in view of the existence of evil" — as *In Memoriam*; as intensely, and as equivocally.' (Christopher Ricks, 'Recent American Poetry', *Massachusetts Review*, 11 (Spring 1970), 313-339 (p. 336).

The fate that has caused Henry's loneliness is objectified through this personification in a comparable way to Henry's objectification of God as a mortal enemy. Time is divided into 'Mr Past', 'Dr Present' and 'Sir Future Dubious', the last being reminiscent of the comically grandiloquent epithets found in minstrelsy. In a mordant pun on heavy drinking, Berryman hints at the notion that Henry is partly attempting to block out trauma through the escape of drink: 'I am fleeing double.' Henry is so drunk he cannot say 'seeing double' and gives a Freudian slip alluding to the refusal to face reality on the part of both sides of his persona: the glib optimism of the blackface friend and the hysterical despair of the voice who sees that 'Henry in trouble whirped out lonely whines'. He similarly puns on the death of his friends while objectifying time as a set of personae: 'Mr Past being no friends of mine.' The past, 'Henry's history'(129, l.12), which has claimed so many lives has left Henry with 'no friends' and he is encircled as he is in Song 137 discussed above by their dead souls, 'all them around'. Henry hates the past, fears the future ('Sir Future dubious, | calamitous & grand'), and 'pines | for Dr Present', surely because in the present nothing ever happens, good or bad, 'Dr Present' does not 'vault unto his task' of taking lives; no-one is dying at the moment, so Henry hopes for status quo. This desire is in fact expressed in Song 32, where Henry wonders why he has been deserted for so long by the state of inertia he craves: 'And where, friend Quo, lay you hiding | across malignant half my years or so? [...] | Status, Status, come home.' By personifying the vagaries of time, Henry as a counterpart to this comes to embody not only the fears of fate but fate itself.

This concept of time personified is analogous to the fears regarding suicide expressed in Song 298:

> Daddy by then will be the nearest ghost,
> honey, but won't return. Daddy's heart sank
> at leaving the lovely baby.
> your Mommy will be with you, when Henry's a blank,
> you'll have to study him in school, at most,
> troubled & gone Henry.

Henry the elegist envisages himself as the potential source of elegy, just as Schwartz was for him, 'the nearest ghost'. the Song shifts from future to past tense when picturing Henry's predicted death, and his anguish at 'leaving the lovely baby', his daughter. By aligning Henry with Schwartz Berryman is reiterating the unique elegiac mode of *The Dream Songs*, the paradoxically intense yet explicitly literary elaboration on the theme of loss. Henry sees himself no longer as a father but as a piece of literature that 'you'll have to study [...] in school'. The emphasis on the psychological traumas of childhood is represented in the use of 'Daddy' instead of the usual pronouns, mimicking the way parents talk about themselves to their children, not as 'I' but as 'Mommy' or 'Daddy', just as Henry speaks to himself throughout the Songs. This usage is most relevant here because Henry is contemplating his own death and its expected effect on his daughter, just as the death of his 'Daddy' brought about his persona and its multifarious facets and problems.

Some of the above extracts illustrate that Henry does not operate in the rounded form of a character in a novel, but in a fundamentally metaphoric sense. Berryman's use of his own life in verse is not simply Berryman, but a heightened and yet incomplete version of himself. As Berryman has pointed out, Henry does not brush his teeth.[12] To impute Henry with the rounded human characteristics of Berryman is akin to wondering what Rosencrantz and Guildenstern get up to while offstage. Henry is perhaps better considered as a symptom of his creator's need to devise a poetics of fragmentation through trauma, and for the critic to attempt, so to speak, a holistic 'cure' of Berryman the poet is not necessarily the way to deduce the core significance of *The Dream Songs*. In the midst of this incompleteness Henry is permitted to utter the uncensored truths that the poet's persona and psyche could not allow, but ironically, because he is incomplete, he does not understand fully these truths. This predicament can be compared with a particular question of censorship and understanding that vexes one of Berryman's thematic sources.

In an essay discussing Freud's *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*,

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[12] Stitt, p. 193.

the famous case of 'Dora', Steven Marcus draws a strong comparison between the nature of Freud's account and the techniques of modernist fiction. It is interesting, however to compare Marcus' interpretation of Freud's analysis with Berryman's presentation of Henry:

> The general form of what Freud has written bears certain suggestive resemblances to a modern experimental novel. Its narrative and expository course, for example, is neither linear nor rectilinear; instead its organization is plastic, involuted, and heterogeneous and follows spontaneously an inner logic that seems frequently to be at odds with itself; it often loops back around itself and is multidimensional in its representation of both its material and itself. Its continuous innovations in formal structure seem unavoidably to be dictated by its substance, by the dangerous, audacious, disreputable, and problematical character of the experiences being dealt with, and by the equally scandalous intentions of the author and the outrageous character of the role he has had the presumption to assume. [13]

There are some remarkable similarities here with some descriptions of the nature of *The Dream Songs*, particularly the uncertain narrative, the 'multidimensional' presentation of material, the 'continuous innovations in formal structure', and the 'outrageous character of the role he has had the presumption to assume.' Henry's formal and psychological uncertainty and his frequent outrages are the aspects of the poem that seem to draw the themes of Freud and of the uncertain 'I' together. Just as Marcus has suggested of Freud, Henry is the typical unreliable narrator, because he not only omits certain information, by not telling us every second of his life, but he is unreliable in that he does not always know exactly what is going on, he does not have control over the actions of those around him, or even his own actions. The difference between Freud and Henry is that Freud omitted certain information from his work on Dora specifically, because it may have compromised the validity of his conclusions, whereas Henry's element of childishness suggests that he has no hidden purpose for being incomplete to his reader; the impression is rather that Henry is simply not in control, he is constantly subject to Berryman, who is conspicuously in charge throughout. In this sense the poem is at once radical and traditional, since the person around whom the experiences of the poem develops is obviously a tool of his creator,

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[13] Steven Marcus, 'Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History', in *In Dora's Case: Freud, hysteria, feminism*, ed. by Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane (New York: Columbia University Press; London: Virago, 1985), pp. 56-91 (p. 64)(first publ. in *Partisan Review* (Winter 1974).

but the creator, the poet has such presence within the work that he is both creator and narrator, so that he is omnisciently creating Henry's world, but allowing himself to be subject to its whims. While Freud is standing outside the world of dreams and attempting to delineate it in a language full of novel scientific coinages, Berryman stands both within and without the dream-scape he attempts to create, also using novel language but having no pretension to logical discourse. Instead he sets a kind of psychological scene, the poem's language a kind of indirect free speech: 'From daylight he got maintrackt, from friends' breath, | wishes, his hopings. Dreams make crawl with fear | Henry but not get up.'(49) Passages like the above help to present Henry as an embodiment of distress and mental disturbance; we can read the poem's scene as a particular view of the world from inside Henry's mind, or as a view of Henry's mind itself.

Jerold M. Martin, in his essay, 'Things are going to pieces: Disintegration Anxiety in *The Dream Songs*' introduces an intriguing comparison between the situation of Henry and the postulations of the Lacanian psychoanalyst, Heinz Kohut, whose clinical language includes a couple of fortuitously relevant phrases, 'selfobject' and 'disintegration anxiety':

> Henry suffers from what Kohut calls *disintegration anxiety*, the feeling that the self is breaking apart [...] Kohut defines a selfobject as an object that is experienced as incompletely separated from the self and that serves to maintain the sense of self. That is, the self recognizes the selfobject as a separate entity yet also sees in it an image of itself. In normal development, selfobjects are the parental figures who serve as images by which the child develops its own firm structure. Disintegration anxiety is produced when such selfobjects are themselves improperly structured or absent altogether, leaving the developing self without the necessary mirror response.[14]

While Martin emphasizes the biographical aspect of this comparison, denoting Berryman's father as his 'selfobject' (it is hard to quarrel with the essence of this as Berryman's personal experience tallies effortlessly with the abstract diagnoses of Kohut quoted by Martin), he also notes the structural importance, which is what I would like to develop. The usefulness of this concept of an external referent which is

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[14] Jerold M. Martin, 'Things Are Going to Pieces: Disintegration Anxiety and *The Dream Songs*', in *Recovering Berryman*, ed. by Richard J. Kelly and Alan Lathrop (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 192.

simultaneously a mirror image can be seen when the need arises to confront the potential critical pitfalls of such self-oriented poetry; that is, the frequent complaint that Henry is no more than a cipher for Berryman's egotism and self-pity. One might argue that instead, Berryman is achieving aesthetic distance with, or despite, the most intimate subject matter. Henry is a sort of mirror image, but he is also external, isolated, in a structural and emotional sense. Berryman is not simply replacing his own name with Henry; there is surely something psychologically more complex going on, manifested in the shifting point of view which Henry takes up. The paradoxical crisis which befalls Henry is that he constantly feels alone ('I'm too alone'(28); 'I'm scared a lonely'(40)) and yet he is perpetually engaged in dialogue. The paradox becomes an ailment because Henry is essentially talking to no-one but himself. His only friend, who has no explicit name, but is identified only by his identification of Henry, is redolent of the young child's concoction of an imaginary friend, something that is perhaps produced by infant trauma, and is perhaps perceived by some as an unhealthy exercise of a child's imagination. Henry also has a tendency to complain, another frowned-upon childhood activity, but the complication of shifting pronouns makes him appear to complain about another Henry. These self-pitying complaints are brash, melodramatic and comical, exaggerated rather than straight maudlin: 'literature bores me, especially great literature, | Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes.'(14). So Henry complains, even about himself, to the point of absurdity, almost arguing himself out of existence.

The fact that Henry is habitually talking to or about himself gives a crucial perspective to the poem's presentation of elegy. If Henry is talking to himself, even in the second or third person, how does his attitude to himself compare with his attitude to those whose memory he seeks to preserve? I would suggest that the answer to this refers back both to Martin's concept of a Lacanian mirror image and Milton's concern with the 'thankless Muse'. In 'Wash Far Away', through a more conventional narrative style, Berryman projects his view nevertheless through a number of different voices, bringing out the general, accepted points of the poem, ('It's about his friend's

death, isn't it?') and also something of its deeper considerations, the self as the real subject, and the questioning of fame.

In the context of 'Lycidas', then, *The Dream Songs* follows in part a thematic path that has been well trodden, but where it differs is in the schizophrenic, substitutive quality of its voice. The poet is putting himself in another's place, in a more than metaphoric way; Berryman sees himself and his own career in Schwartz, like Milton did in King, but because of the nature of Henry, he can appear to talk about his own fame from a point outside himself, so that he is more clearly elegizing both his subject and himself. For example, Song 147 is written in the third person, but the subject ambiguously moves from Henry to Schwartz. In the opening line, 'Henry's mind grew blacker the more he thought', the figure henceforth referred to as 'he' is apparently Henry:

> Henry's mind grew blacker the more he thought.
> He looked onto the world like the act of an aged whore.
> Delmore, Delmore.
> He flung to pieces and they hit the floor.

The 'he' that 'flung to pieces' here seems to be Henry, but given Schwartz's documented mental imbalance and the fact that he died collapsing on the floor outside a hotel room, the subject acquires a double allusion. More than merely identifying with the subject of his elegy, Berryman is creating a deliberate confusion between the subject and the poet; not only does he see his own death, and the passage of his own fame in Delmore's, he allows his poetic self apparently to be Schwartz.

What Berryman appears to seek, then, by placing his elegies in the context of Henry's confusion is to allow that confusion to filter into the elegies for a specific formal and thematic purpose; that is, to make the reader familiar with a world in which the expected narrative of the long poem becomes as much spatial as it is temporal, so the reader may ask not what, but who, happens next. By putting Henry frequently outside himself, Berryman puts his character in the same position as Delmore and the other subjects of elegies, so that each figure, and especially Schwartz, becomes subsumed into a protean psyche, almost as if each subject were

talking to its own echo, just as Henry does. Henry can identify with each subject because to a certain extent he becomes the subject; Henry talks to himself in the third person and so when he talks about someone else in the third person, the identification, and indeed the confusion with himself is evident and intended. So Berryman's elegies are more consistent with their context (*The Dream Songs*) than those elegies to which I have compared it, since Berryman's elegiac themes, the issue of the self as subject, the questioning of fame, and of course the preoccupation with death, are not confined to the elegies themselves but constitute the basic thematic premise of the work within which they are contained.

Chapter Six
'We hafta die': Berryman's use of the minstrel voice and its relevance to elegy

The theme of the minstrel show and its characters that runs through *The Dream Songs* is attributed by Haffenden to a book which Berryman mentions as a source in one of his letters, *Tambo & Bones* by Carl Wittke, from 1930.[1] While there is no dispute as to Berryman's use of this as a primary source, I would suggest that his reading on the subject was perhaps not confined to a single work, and that his use of the minstrel figure is a complex if ultimately unifying issue, drawing on more authentic features of African American culture, as well as arousing connections with other more primitive traditions. What I also would argue is that Berryman is not incorporating the minstrel tradition into his work purely as a means of altering tone or varying mood, but that it has a vital relevance to the poem's concerns with identity, and that its role in the characterization of Henry gives the elegies of the poem numerous facets of irony and levels of psychological as well as cultural significance which mark out the Dream Songs, and by extension their elegies, as something distinctively American. The placing of the elegies in such a context distinguishes them from the mourning poetry of his contemporaries, and from that to be found in the generally accepted canon. While Berryman certainly makes something new out of the recurrent themes within elegy of religious uncertainty, creative doubt, envy of the dead, it is the crisis of identity, the apparent loss of a coherent sense of self, which typifies and individualizes Henry's mourning, and which is reflected in *The Dream Songs* by the recurrent image of a white man in black make-up.

Robert Toll, in his book *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America*, remarks on numerous sources of evidence suggesting that the white minstrels of the mid-nineteenth century, who are remembered today chiefly as stylized parodists of black plantation slaves, did claim to draw directly, if

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[1] Carl Wittke, *Tambo & Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1930).

inaccurately, from African American culture and folklore. Toll remarks that some of the programmes for the shows of the Christy Minstrels, the most famous and popular troupe of their time, 'advertised, for example that the song "We Are Coming, Sister Mary" was "founded on a superstition that exists among the slaves that when one of their number is about to die they are forewarned by singing spirits" or "in a *dream song*"(my emphasis).'[2] Along with the minstrel programmes, Toll mentions the anthropological work by N. N. Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*, as a major source of information concerning African folklore amongst American slaves.[3] It is unclear whether Berryman was specifically aware of Puckett's work or the minstrel programme, although both Puckett's and Wittke's books seem to have been equally well known for their time, so it seems likely that Berryman knew both. Regardless of this, Berryman was clearly not unaware of black culture, or white visions of it, as can be seen in certain Songs which deal, in dialect, with very specific issues of race in American society. In Song 60 Henry and his friend argue about the state of the civil rights movement at the time, which in this Song's case was 1962 to '63:[4]

> After eight years, be less dan eight percent,
> distinguish' friend, of coloured wif de whites
> in de School, in de Souf
> Is coloured gobs, is coloured officers,
> Mr Bones. Dat's nuffin? —Uncle Tom,
> sweep shut yo mouf,
>
> is million blocking from de proper job,
> de fairest houses & de churches eben.

Here Berryman uses the kind of phonetic rendering of black speech that we find in minstrel dialogue, but the content is certainly not the comic jousting of minstrelsy, and indeed refers to the sentimentalism of nineteenth century theatre in the insult meted out to Henry's friend for suggesting that there has been some progress in racial equality — 'Uncle Tom, I sweep shut yo mouf'. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was frequently performed by minstrel troupes, though in a form barely recognizable from Stowe's

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[2] Robert Toll, *Blacking up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 47.
[3] N. N. Puckett, *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926).
[4] *Commentary* , p. 159.

novel, especially concerning its anti-slavery sentiment,[5] but ironically it had become in Henry's present time a term of abuse for one who tries to please the white establishment and not question his oppression. So, while minstrels would very likely have been talking about Uncle Tom, it would have been in such different terms that Berryman's very use of this juxtaposition of the antique with the modern constitutes a radical commentary outside of what Henry actually has to say.

This and other examples which shall be mentioned later would seem to indicate that Berryman's appropriation of the minstrel form and his appreciation of the black experience stems from more than his reading of Wittke's single work; its purpose in *The Dream Songs* is manifold, going beyond theatre, and beyond race. At the same time, the centrality of minstrelsy to the poem's imaging of Henry cannot be underestimated, and is worth investigation. Wittke, and Toll, much later, give accounts of the structure of minstrel shows that constitute a remarkable set of ingredients for *The Dream Songs*, structurally, thematically and linguistically. Toll describes the typical format that grew from the performance of the Virginia Minstrels in 1843:

> To improve the coordination of the show, they arranged their chairs in a semi-circle, with the tambourine and bones (simple rhythm 'clackers') players on the ends; to give the performance the aura of a real party and to provide continuity, they interspersed comic repartee between their otherwise unconnected songs and dances.[6]

By the 1850s the show had developed a three-part structure, with the first part involving not just the original four minstrels but the entire company. Toll continues:

> The first part [...] followed a standard pattern that included jokes and comic songs interspersed between 'serious' songs and dances performed by individuals with the full cast often singing the choruses. Besides the humour and songs done in dialect, there were nondialect songs and material that commented on current events and social problems.[7]

Berryman had clearly found in this form something that he could use programmatically as a thoroughgoing metaphor that he could incorporate into the

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5 'Christy and Wood [minstrel troupe leaders] portrayed none of the cruelty or suffering of slavery as they reduced *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to just another grouping of plantation songs and dances.' Toll, p.93
6 ibid., p. 51-2.
7 ibid., p. 52.

whole poetic purpose of the Songs. The similarities here seem in a sense stronger than those between the songs and comparable features of other poetry. Berryman could certainly be said to provide continuity by interspersing 'comic repartee between otherwise unconnected songs and dances,' and yet Berryman goes even further, such is his treatment of Henry's psychotic persona that the jokes sometimes arrive within and not just between serious Songs, as in Song 76, 'Henry's Confession':

> Nothin very bad happen to me lately.
> How you explain that? —I explain that, Mr Bones,
> terms o' your bafflin odd sobriety.
> Sober as man can get, no girls, no telephones,
> what could happen bad to Mr Bones?
> —*If* life is a handkerchief sandwich,
>
> in a modesty of death I join my father
> who dared so long agone leave me.

The dialogue between Henry and his friend switches from the subject of Henry's 'bafflin odd sobriety' to Henry's contemplation of suicide imitative of his father, and as discussed in Chapter Five, Berryman uses the deliberately misplaced comedy of the minstrel voice to mockingly echo and therefore ameliorate inappropriate juxtapositions, in this instance turning the poem on the whimsical, absurd image of 'a handkerchief sandwich'. All of this is presented in the format of the banter between minstrels. Similarly one could argue with little difficulty that the statement 'besides the humour and songs done in dialect, there were nondialect songs and material that commented on current events and social problems' could just as easily be applied to *The Dream Songs*, and thereafter that Berryman's structural intentions in this respect stem from his studying of the format of the 1840s minstrels. The poem does indeed follow a 'standard pattern' though within this pattern a great deal of anarchy and a range of emotions was loosed, as was the case with minstrel shows. Both the general and specific similarities do not end here, either. The strong influence of Wittke's work can be seen from the very beginning in the co-opting of Wittke's epigram 'Go in brack man, de day's yo own' by Berryman as one of the three epigrams that precede *77 Dream Songs*. The most obvious specific appropriation is the naming of the endmen, the two buffoon characters who sat at either end of the semi-circular

presentation in the first part of a minstrel show, called Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones. The diverse topics for the endmen's verbal comedy that Toll mentions in the previous quotation echoes what Wittke has to say, who in addition hints at some of the linguistic diversity that Berryman appears to have assimilated into his set of lexical idiosyncrasies:

> Although there were many conundrums, puns, and humorous situations depending for their comic success on the Negro's love of big words, his clumsy mispronunciations, and his obtuseness, the jokesters of minstrelsy, like the comedians of the present day, claimed the whole world for their province. Endmen's 'gags' frequently dealt with Negro life, but the blackface comedian by no means was limited to that field. Everything from mothers-in-law to prohibition, from Nero to Calvin Coolidge, from Adam and Eve to Einstein, from the marriage relation to relativity, was utilized in the endless search for 'new' comic material.[8]

The list of subjects for comedy that Wittke provides is even reminiscent in its way of Berryman's particular heterogeneity. Where the minstrels would discuss mothers-in-law and prohibition, so Berryman would mention his real mother('my mother told me as a boy | (repeatingly) "Ever to confess you're bored | means you have no | Inner Resources."'(14)), or his heavy drinking:

> Why drink so, two days running?
> two months, O seasons, years, two decades running?
> I answer (smiles) my question on the cuff:
> Man, I been thirsty. (96)

Similarly, where the minstrels would talk of Nero and Calvin Coolidge, Berryman talks of Kleitos' fight with Alexander (33), and Eisenhower, in the comical and scathing 'Lay of Ike'(23). Berryman's 'endless search' is, however, less perhaps for comic material *per se* than for an inclusiveness and an almost epic variety of incident and reference, that creates useful tension by straining against the very things with which he is attempting to unify the Songs, such as the logos of the clownish minstrel.

Berryman may also have been struck, in studying Wittke's work, by the underlying note of sadness inherent in the minstrel's art, aside from the more obvious ironies latent in his own potential re-use of it as a theme. Wittke, for the most part, concerns himself primarily with the entertainment value of minstrelsy than with its

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[8] Wittke, p. 166.

sociological, racial or anthropological implications. He does, however, hint at the solitary nature of the father of mintrelsy, Thomas Dartmouth Rice, who 'gave the first entertainment in which a blackface performer was not only the main actor, but the entire act!'[9] 'Daddy' Rice, as he was called, is the subject of Berryman's dedication for Song 2: 'The second Song is dedicated to the memory of Daddy Rice who sang and jumped "Jim Crow" in Louisville in 1828 (London, 1836 and later).'[10] Rice's 'Jim Crow' dance, an appropriation from an elderly black man observed while on tour in 1828 was, as Toll says, 'a public sensation and took him on a triumphant tour of major entertainment centers.'[11] Wittke seems to suggest that such 'tours' were not at all glamorous:

> He [Rice] soon abandoned his career as an artisan to take to the open road as an itinerant player. It was in a day when the lot of these itinerant thespians [...] was anything but a happy and pleasant one [...] these troubadours sang and danced and played their way through the crude, raw frontier settlements of Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee.[12]

Wittke goes on to give a more telling indication of Rice's solitary existence: 'Strangely enough, Rice played in very few minstrel shows. He preferred to act alone, or to perform between the acts of a more serious play.'[13] There seems to be an implicit resemblance, in this light, between the character of Rice and that of Henry, in his transitory nature; the numerous settings for Songs, such as Ireland, India, Japan, and the emphasis on travel to these places; as well as the sense of solitude which this rootlessness implies. The derivation of the individual title of the Song, 'Big Buttons, Cornets: the advance' may be explained by a passage from Wittke:

> Another feature of minstrel performances was the band and the street parade. Whenever minstrels came to town, their arrival was heralded by a street parade, in which the 'silver' or 'gold *cornet* band' gorgeously attired in colourful coats and trousers, *big* brass *buttons* and striking hats, led the procession through the streets of the town to the theatre. (my emphasis)[14]

The complex blackface language of Song 2 is suggestive of a particular

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[9] Wittke, p. 20.
[10] *The Dream Songs* (Note) p. vi.
[11] Toll, p. 28.
[12] Wittke, p. 21.
[13] ibid., p. 31.
[14] ibid., p. 145.

difficulty stemming from minstrelsy and black culture itself which Berryman utilizes for a multiple effect:

> The jane is zoned! no nightspot here, no bar
> there, no sweet freeway, and no premises
> for business purposes [...]
> Le's do a hoedown, gal,
> one blue, one shuffle,
> if them is all you seem to require. Strip,
> ol banger, skip us we, sugar; so hang on
> one chaste evenin.
>
> —Sir Bones, or Galahad: astonishin
> yo legal & yo good. Is you feel well?
> Honey dusk do sprawl.

Haffenden remarks that the first stanza 'refers to the fact that, on Election Day, all bars are closed'.[15] But the language used to describe this situation is less than straightforward, and seems likely to suggest the prohibition talk of minstrels that Wittke mentioned, in the references to 'premises | for business purposes'. The use of a sexual metaphor for the unavailability of drink in the opening phrase ('The jane is zoned' roughly works out as 'the girl is protected, i.e. by a chastity belt') would suit both minstrel audiences and the lascivious character of Henry.[16] In a corresponding way, the urge to dance, to 'do a hoedown' comes straight from the minstrel presentation of slaves, while at the same time enacts Henry's impatience to get drunk; a dance is simply something to do until the bars open, he and his dancing partner try to 'hang on | one chaste evenin', once again dovetailing into Henry's association of his desire for drink with his desire for women. But while the Song may be understood to an extent, its intention in language seems to be part of Berryman's twin purpose, to evoke the minstrel scene and to connect with aspects of black American culture. The complexity of Song 2 suggests the comic malapropisms of the minstrels' stump speeches, given by Tambo or Bones who would pontificate on a particular issue but make fools of themselves in their attempts to seem intelligent; the stump speeches were a comic interlude that reinforced the suggestion that sophisticated thought was beyond the slaves. Simultaneously, and with deep irony, it hints at the potentially

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15 *Commentary*, p. 82.
16 *OED*, 2nd edn, vol. XX, p. 820.

closed nature of black American speech, jive talk, which is intended to exclude the white man, the *ofay*, from the conversation. So while the dedication is to Daddy Rice, the inferences that can be drawn from the Song in his honour go beyond simply jumping 'Jim Crow'.

As well as the character of Rice, Berryman may have noticed in a curiously inexpansive passage, Wittke's remark that 'E. P. Christy, founder of the original "Christy's"[one of the very first minstrel troupes], died in 1862, as the result of jumping from a second story window.'[17]

The correspondence between minstrel shows and *The Dream Songs* is not, however, exhaustive, and Berryman's use of its constituents is not a rigid system. Some critics have been quick to label Henry as the Interlocutor, the master of ceremonies in the shows, and while this works up to a point, the character of Henry in blackface is both more and less than this figure.[18] A further description by Toll illustrates this: 'An interlocutor would appear centre stage as the sagacious controller of the more rowdy actions of Tambo and Bones, the endmen. With a precise if somewhat pompous command of the language, an extensive vocabulary, and a resonant voice, the interlocutor personified dignity, which made the raucous comedy of the endmen even funnier'.[19] While the Interlocutor's 'precise if somewhat pompous command of the language' and 'extensive vocabulary' would suggest the character of Henry, albeit more in his whitefaced moments, the attitude of dignified temperance against the excesses of Tambo and Bones would seem more suited to Henry's friend, when calming him down in his Mr Bones guise. Conversely one would not ascribe the pompous command of the language to Henry's friend, who is more of a plain-talking voice of reason. So even when employing the multi-voiced analogue of the minstrel show to represent a bifurcation of personality, he splits and appears to deliberately confuse that image: his multiple personae themselves are

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17 Wittke, p. 52.
18 William Wasserstrom, 'Cagey John: Berryman as Medicine Man', in *John Berryman*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York/Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1989), pp. 5-20 (p. 9) (first publ. in *Centennial Review*, 12.3 (1968), 334-354).
19 Toll, p. 53.

suffering identity crises.

Berryman's appropriation of the minstrel as an image, then, is a central motif that he uses as a freely translated metaphor and a kind of ironic cultural touchstone. He may well have been aware of the reference I mentioned earlier in which the Christy Minstrels mentioned, in their programmes, the superstition of a 'dream song' among the slaves; this programme resides at the Harvard Theatre Collection, and if his research on the subject was more thorough than a reading of Wittke alone, as I have suggested, then it would not be surprising if Berryman had indeed consulted these manuscripts during his times at Harvard in the forties, while composing 'The Nervous Songs', his prototype Dream Songs, and again in the early fifties, when the Songs themselves were taking shape.

Whether or not Berryman was aware of this occurrence of the phrase 'dream song', he is clearly not using the minstrel voice as an arbitrary addition to the regular narrative voice of Henry, but with a definite alertness to the consequences, for the poem's purpose, of such a symbolic device being used. In referring to such an historical feature as this, he is identifying his Henry with a source of enormously popular but thoroughly outmoded and archaic entertainment, noted primarily for unsophisticated physical comedy and parodic, overblown verbal contortions on the part of the chief comic characters, Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones, as well as sentimental songs of love and loss. These features, as we have seen, are evident in a number of different forms in *The Dream Songs*. Berryman seems to be doing several things at once in his employment of the minstrel show. In one sense he is grasping a cultural and political nettle, using a genre of American entertainment which many would rather forget, and highlighting strands of current American life without simple recourse to a more obvious satire or social criticism. In the guise of a minstrel the satire becomes a more complex statement. While in blackface Henry could seem to be aligning himself with those in America who, in both cultural and political terms, would prefer a return to the antebellum status quo, the kind of plantation life so glibly celebrated in minstrel shows, or at least to life before the upheavals of the 1960s. Yet

it seems clear that this is a very limiting appreciation of the role of Henry. In terms of the language of the blackface Henry, for example, one might discover that this is not simply one voice. This in fact would accord with Toll's account of dialect. He makes the point that Tambo and Bones would use 'heavier and more ludicrous dialects' than their companions, and while 'contort[ing] their bodies in exaggerated gestures' they 'twisted their words in endless puns in order to keep the audience laughing.'[20] Berryman seems to acknowledge that any phonetic rendering of black speech will inevitably generalize and sometimes tends to stereotype; but within this framework of acknowledgement he makes an attempt to distinguish between presentations of dialect which are crudely meant to imply lower intelligence (which was the intent of the minstrel endmen), and those that echo more faithful attempts at representing dialect. One example of the latter is Song 40:

> I'm scared a lonely. Never see my son,
> easy be not to see anyone,
> combers out to sea
> know they're goin somewhere but not me.
> Got a little poison, got a little gun,
> I'm scared a lonely [...]
>
> Wishin was dyin but I gotta make
> it all this way to that bed on these feet
> where peoples said to meet.
> Maybe but even if I see my son
> forever never, get back on the take,
> free, black & forty-one.

Both the phonetics and the content suggest that this is not part of the minstrel theme but is rather intended to echo some of the sort of black speech found in Twain or Faulkner, which may still be in some sense stereotyping, but whose intention is less obviously for comic exaggeration. The fact that the narrative here is perhaps of the fugitive slave, urgent and serious in tone, suggestive of nervous exhaustion, and not of the happy plantation Bones-man or the town dandy, appears to confirm that Berryman is not confined to an ironic presentation of blackness through the prism of Mr Bones. Just as Henry appears to talk to himself in many guises, this is another, albeit more obscure in context, paradoxically because of the relative clarity of its narrative and language.

Certain critics have suggested that the reason for Berryman's use of the blackface idiom is part of a perceived empathy with the outsider, the outcast. But as in 'The Imaginary Jew', Berryman's short story in which the central character is in the agonizing position of defending the race to which he is simultaneously denying he belongs, Berryman's treatment of empathy is difficult, and it is not so simple as to say he is empathizing with the black American. In minstrel mode, Henry is taking the voice of a grossly caricatured plantation slave. What one must accommodate to this portrayal is an awareness of *Berryman's* awareness, and then ask once again why he uses this idiom. It cannot be overstressed that the minstrel show was the first and most successful art form or entertainment which was distinctively and unmistakably American. Although much of the material that constituted it was in fact drawn from European theatre and musical sources — those with which the white minstrels were familiar — the singing plantation slave could only be an American phenomenon (despite being authentically American, minstrelsy was generally not authentically Southern; most minstrel performers and songwriters were unlikely to have even seen a plantation, and neither had the northern audiences, which were the staple of minstrel performances).[20] As Toll points out, minstrelsy was, even in a watered down and prejudicial way, transmitting folk culture and beliefs over the country in a way that had not been achieved before; here the early itinerant performers like Rice were vital, as they travelled across the backwaters of the antebellum States picking up influences from African American culture.[21] So Berryman's attachment to minstrelsy may be, in part, due to its curious inclusivity; its once broad appeal as a most populist medium (the exemplar of this being that minstrel performers would always be willing to tailor their performances to please their audiences) gives the Songs an aura of the common man, an Everyman, bewildered by the modern world, unsure of his identity. Furthermore the commentary on both this problem of self which Henry experiences, and on the world he inhabits, that is implied with the very juxtaposition of the minstrel form with the voices of the late twentieth century is something that drives

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[20] Wittke, p. 39.
[21] Toll, p. 10.

The Dream Songs at a fundamental level. William Wasserstrom comments on the fact that white minstrels often took up elements of black culture that originally satirized the whites that would attend and perform such shows.[22] But Berryman's rationale in respect of such an ironic situation is less with the issue of race, perhaps (though this certainly is an issue at times in the poem) than with the issue of persona, particularly the notion of self-mockery that arises from presenting Henry in blackface. The fact that Henry, unlike minstrel performers, is clearly aware of the inaccuracy of his minstrel guise and knows he is ridiculing himself makes this situation much more poignant. Once again it is Berryman's awareness which creates the necessary tension for the minstrel scene to be played out.

The undermining of this original irony with one that lays the self-mockery wide open runs parallel with Berryman's analogues of the musical element of minstrel shows, and this in turn leads to a vital connection between the heart of the Dream Songs and minstrelsy. The songs of Stephen Foster, who wrote many of the most famous minstrel songs for the Christy Minstrels, such as 'Camptown Races' and 'Old Folks at Home', are noted for their emphasis on mawkish sentiment and a romantic preoccupation with death. Toll notes: 'He intensified the emotional impact of many of his love songs by directing them toward dying or dead lovers, which also ensured that the love was free of sexuality.'[23] The relevance of this to Berryman's Songs, and crucially, to his elegies, seems obvious. Berryman takes the notion of the popular nineteenth century love song and savagely undermines it with subject matter that, while it may or may not be free of sexuality, is loaded sometimes to breaking point with mordantly ironic psychological and personal material. Song 143 hints at the sentimentality of such songs, but sharpens the sentiment to a painful point:

> —That's enough of that, Mr Bones. *Some* lady you make.
> Honour the burnt cork, be a vaudeville man,
> I'll sing you now a song
> the like of which may bring your heart to break:
> he's gone! and we don't know where. When he began
> taking the pistol out & along,

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[22] Wasserstrom, p. 10
[23] Toll, p. 33.

you was just a little; but gross fears
accompanied us along the beaches, pal.
My mother was scared almost to death.
He was going to swim out, with me, forevers,
and a swimmer strong he was in the phosphorescent Gulf,
but he decided on lead.

That mad drive wiped out my childhood. I put him down
while all the same on forty years I love him
stashed in Oklahoma
besides his brother Will. Bite the nerve of the town
for anyone so desperate. I repeat: I love him
until *I* fall into a coma.

The opening line from Henry's friend suggests a more light-hearted conversation about Henry's problems with the opposite sex is just ending, and it seems to be just an overture to the minstrel ditty that is introduced by the instruction to 'honour the burnt cork', which of course refers to the make-up used to blacken minstrels' faces. The bleakly comic understatement of 'I'll sing you now a song | the like of which may bring your heart to break' intends to recall the introductory tones of the minstrel balladeer, a character who may also be a noteworthy corollary of the persona of Henry in his more lustful or lovesick moments, which may partly explain the '*Some* lady you make' remark ('The musical star of the first part was the romantic balladeer, usually a tenor, who sang sentimental love songs that provided an outlet for tender emotions and a chance for the ladies in the audience to sigh, to weep, or to do both.')[24] Berryman replaces transparent sentiment with a less misty-eyed recollection of Henry and his father's suicide, his flirtations with drowning, though in the end 'he decided on lead'. While the minstrel singer mourns the passing of a childhood sweetheart or a benevolent slave owner, Henry takes his father to task for the 'mad drive' which 'wiped out my childhood', and as if to emphasize the confusion and to contrast with the simple romantic drama of a minstrel ballad, Henry, in the midst of his anger tries to convince himself that 'I love him | until *I* fall into a coma'.

The reference to street parades mentioned earlier in connection with Song 2 may also be considered a source of irony for Berryman, in his 'Strut for Roethke', Song 18. Henry, as Bones, appears to direct an orchestra to play in Roethke's honour:

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[24] ibid., p. 54

'Westward, hit a low note [...] hit a high long note.' Within a framework based on a light-hearted entertainment, Berryman inserts a tone of sadness contrasted, in its sincerity, with the sentimental balladry of the minstrel; but in addition he inserts hints of the dark humour that characterizes Henry. Roethke is viewed in death with some envy, which Berryman follows up with a parodically euphemistic image of his passing: '(O lucky fellow, eh Bones?)—drifted off upstairs, I downstairs, somewheres.' His envy is more physical when he comments on the burial of a poet noted for his image of a child 'Crawling on all fours, I Alive, in a slippery grave'[25] : 'Hit a high long note, for a lover found I needing a lower into friendlier ground.'

The blackface voice of Henry does not always abut on the voice of his elegies. Yet just as Henry's presence is felt even when his name or voice does not appear, so the minstrel dialogues seem to elegize even when a subject is not apparent; and by the same token, the elegizing voice of Henry can be an hysterical, bleakly comic, confused and schizophrenic one, which is very much the case in blackface. Whilst Mr Bones and his friend are often arguing about the restraint of lust, they also dramatize Henry's deepest fears about death and mourning, as in Song 36:

> The high ones die, die. They die. You look up and who's there?
> —Easy, easy, Mr Bones. I is on your side.
> I smell your grief.
> —I sent my grief away. I cannot care
> forever. With them all again & again I died
> and cried, and I have to live.
>
> —Now there you exaggerate, Sah. We hafta *die*.
> That is our 'pointed task. Love & die.
> —Yes; that makes sense.

As with the elegies, Henry's grief is mingled with the agonies of fame; his assertion that 'the high ones [the best poets] die', before their time, is trailing with it a concern over his own 'highness'. While his chief emotional complaint seems to be that he is tired of grieving ('with them all again & again I died I and cried, and I have to live'), this suggests a worry on the part of the poet that since he continues to live, he is therefore not a 'high one'. His friend attempts to comfort him in his grief, but does not

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[25] Roethke, 'Weed Puller', in *Collected Poems*, p. 37.

appear to fully understand what Henry means by 'I have to live', since his reply is that dying is what we have to do, it 'is our 'pointed task'. Henry would apparently prefer to die, yet his friend's consolation is along the lines of 'everybody has to die sometime.' Henry knows this, and does not want to postpone death, but hasten it. He is, in fact, comforted by his friend's nugget of hackneyed wisdom ('Yes; that makes sense'), but not for very long.

This comforting dialogue may also be drawn in part from aspects of minstrelsy, which in turn echo recorded studies of African American folklore and original African beliefs. Charles Haywood records a minstrel show exchange between Mr Bones and the returning ghost of Daddy Rice:

> Bones: Who-who-who dar! What, dat you, Massa Rice? Why I t'ought you was dead long ago. How you git back?
> Daddy Rice: You know what Shakespeare said 'bout not bein' for a day, but for all de time. Bress you, I ain't been dead at all, but only playin possum.[26]

This exchange draws together a number of Berryman's concerns — his obsession with Shakespeare, both in a literary sense (as mentioned in Chapter Two his manuscript collection contains an unfinished biography), and personally, in the 'Hamlet-ness' of his personal biography, which has great implications for the creation of Henry, and following on from this, the relationship of Henry to his father. Here a dialogue between the minstrel Bones and the ghost of a character called *Daddy* Rice must have central significance. Interestingly it is not Jim Crow but Daddy Rice, the white performer, not the black character, whose ghost returns. This may be connected to the inherent racism of such a performance, in that black people at that time couldn't be considered to have souls, since they had only the status of animals. But this has a symbolic relevance to *The Dream Songs* in that after death imitation also ends, Henry will cease to be in blackface when he dies; the 'departure' of normality he experiences in Song 1, the shattering of persona, will be resolved when he 'heft[s] the ax once more' and 'fell[s] it on the start' in the penultimate Song, 384, killing his dead father along with his own grief, which is what ultimately constitutes his persona, and which

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[26] Charles Haywood, in *Folkore and Soiety*, ed. by Bruce Jackson (Flatsboro, 1966), p. 86.

was born when his father killed himself.

The idea of communication with the dead as presented in minstrel shows is definitely not a white invention put onto black characters, but recurs in countless anthropological works; if Berryman was aware of African American folklore at all, he will surely have come across these beliefs, which time and again emphasize the centrality of the dream. Of course the dream as an image in poetry is almost as common as the mention of love, or death, and so the associations are boundless, but the particular connections here are too fruitful to be coincidental. In *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Eugene Genovese remarks on the decoration of African American graves with broken earthenware: 'the apparent symbolism [...] invokes the destruction of the body by death'; African American and African belief regarding this act involves 'a sense of death as a broken body and to the need to compensate the spirit'.[27] This would seem to have some bearing on the fractured state of Henry in Songs like 195: 'I stalk my mirror down this corridor | my pieces litter [...] All my pieces kneel and we all scream.' Genovese later records an African belief that has survived in America:

> Negro beliefs of distinctly African origin, prevalent in slavery times continued well into the twentieth century and have not disappeared in the rural south or in the innermost parts of the great cities. The dead can return to the living in spiritual visitations that are not necessarily ill-intentioned or dangerous.[28]

This belief is supported by Jackson Steward Lincoln, writing in 1935:

> The belief that human souls come from without to visit the sleeper who sees them as dreams, is found among the Ojibway, and the British Columbian Indians of North America, and among tribes of West Africa. Among the latter all their dreams are regarded as visits from spirits of the dead.[29]

As Berryman implores in his note to the poem, opinions and errors are to be referred to the title of the poem; it is worth remembering that Berryman is rendering Henry's, not his own, vision of the world, and that that vision is a permanent dream state. So when Berryman mourns the loss of Schwartz, his grim vision is a dream in which 'round me the dead lie in their limp postures'; in this same dream 'came the Hebrew

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[27] Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World The Slaves Made* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1975), p. 200.
[28] ibid., p. 217.
[29] Jackson Steward Lincoln, *Dream in Primitive Cultures* (London: Cresset Press, 1935), p. 45.

spectre, on a note of woe | and join me O'(146).

In Song 220, Henry's friend leads a contemplation of apocalypse using the minstrel stage as emblematic of wasted and lost time; the act of blacking up as emblematic of the common futility of diverse religions, whatever the colour of skin of their disciples or the guise of their messiahs:

> —If we're not Jews, how can messiah come?
> Praise God, brothers, Who is a coloured man.
> (Some time we'll do it again,
> in whiteface.) 'Ram,' was his last word, like 'Mary'
> or 'OM' or a perishing new grunt.
> (winged 'em) Kingdom? Some [...]
>
> we will not wonder, will us, Mr Bones,
> when either He looms down or wifout trace
> we vanisheth. It's tall
>
> time now in Ghetto-town: it's curtain call:
> hard now to read the time. Seem to Me I'm
> not altogether the same
> pro-man I strutted out from the wings as,
> like losing faith.

Henry's friend categorizes religious epithets as 'perishing new grunt[s]', expressing a withering cynicism about the prospect of salvation, or at least for everyone: 'Kingdom? Some.' He suggests that while the end does appear to be nigh, neither he nor Henry will spend time to wonder about when 'either He looms down or wifout trace | we vanisheth.' In the final stanza the narrator conflates a real image of black life and its imitative blackface counterpart, the ghetto and the minstrel stage, perhaps suggesting that those who face reality and those who practise delusion will ultimately suffer the same fate. This same stanza manages to sum up most of the themes for which the minstrel figure is Berryman's cipher: this mingling of real with theatrical, imaginary worlds (It's tall time now in Ghetto-town: it's curtain-call'); the loss of identity ('Seem to Me I'm | not altogether the same | pro-man I strutted out from the wings as'); a consequent failure of religion to bridge the gap caused by this loss ('like losing faith').

In the superstition recounted by the Christy Minstrels, the experience of a 'dream song' meant that someone is about to die. For Henry, many have already died,

but it is his own fate which is mirrored in that of his coevals; 'their deaths were theirs. I wait on for my own. | I dare say it won't be long'. The notion of imminent and inevitable death, when considered in the light of such a belief, becomes not merely a facet of Berryman's poetics, but the motivational force. Even if Berryman's use of the phrase Dream Song is coincidental, the significance is not lost, because, in the same way that discrete belief systems around the world tend to duplicate each other; the coincidence provides emblematic resonance and a greater level of coherence to add to what Berryman had already intended in his incorporation of minstrel and African American themes into his work. Henry's visions of his own death are enacted in the Songs by the subjects of Berryman's elegies; so when one dies, he too steps closer to his own end. In the context of the blackface guise, Henry's Dream Songs are indeed the scenes of ghostly visitations, and 'singing spirits'.

Chapter Seven
Beyond Henry: Concepts of Self and Mourning in *Love & Fame*

In the final collection of poetry published while he was alive, Berryman attempted a radical change of direction after *The Dream Songs*. *Love & Fame* shows a marked departure from the idiosyncratic style of its predecessor, while retaining certain elements that are recognizably part of the Berryman manner. It was not just the style, however, but the content that changed; where *The Dream Songs* blended memory, the observational and the elegiac into the jumbled scene of a poet's life during its composition, *Love & Fame* charts particular events with a greater formal simplicity and a more prosaic, less equivocal diction. Its sense of the elegiac is more abstruse, but is as much bound up with the poems' poetics as is the case with *The Dream Songs*. Whereas *The Dream Songs*, however, unearths the elegiac through complex empathy, *Love & Fame* may be seen more simply as a purely internal memorial, dealing with private memory as a source of elegy and reappraisal.

Love & Fame comprises four sections: the first dramatizes Berryman's time at Columbia, his relationships, his academic life and the beginnings of his poetic career. Part Two traces his journey to England and his time at Cambridge. Part Three presents the poet in the act of remembering the events of Parts One and Two, and his grave disillusionment with his present. Part Four, entitled 'Eleven Addresses to the Lord', presents the poet experiencing spiritual redemption from his former misery.

The critical reaction to this collection has consisted mostly of harsh reviews, and not a great amount of penetrating analysis. I intend to show that viewed in the context of his work as a whole, *Love & Fame* is part of a natural progression in his poetry, towards clarity, a greater specificity of subject matter, and a resolution of troubled personae. The flaws that occur in the work have, for the most part, resulted from the incompleteness of his work's progression, an unwillingness to move away from the characteristic elements of his previous achievements, where these flaws were

then often strengths. In the shadow of *The Dream Songs*, this collection was perhaps bound to disappoint; but it reflects usefully on the former's approach to 'the life of the modern poet', and the means of versifying experience into something more than prose recollection. In *Love & Fame* Berryman deals differently with the qualities also found in *The Dream Songs* of temporal, mental and spiritual uncertainty and unease. It has a greater scope, chronologically, yet a far narrower remit in subject: a seemingly far less ambitious work. The immediacy of this impression lies undoubtedly in its diction.

The poet expresses his clear intentions of comparative straight talking in the opening poem, 'Her & It'. The opening line, 'I fell in love with a girl', is as unadorned as it could be; in the following line, however, he seems to lapse into the first of several contrived echoes of an earlier poetic voice. 'O and a gash' has the flavour of Dream Song lines such as 'Oh ho alas alas'(384), but its basic qualities are different from those in *The Dream Songs*, where the line itself has an intrinsic density of meaning; in this poem, the line creates uncertainty through its equivocal attachment to the conjunction in the previous phrase, 'with a girl', and also through the use of the ambiguous 'gash' (Berryman stated in his afterword that '"Gash" is sexual slang, of course'[1]). Once again the ambiguity relates to the previous line more than the word itself. Similarly the later line 'from O wherever ah how far she is' appears to contain those interjections merely to fill up the pentameter, cluttering the otherwise relatively plain narrative with echoes of the voice employed in *The Dream Songs*. In the penultimate stanza Berryman writes 'my tough Songs well in Tokyo & Paris I fall under scrutiny.' The reference to *The Dream Songs* includes another such echo in the deliberately misplaced 'well', as if to remind us how his Songs sounded. When he writes '*Time* magazine yesterday slavered Saul's ass', it is not clear what he means by 'slavered', an intransitive verb requiring a preposition. Its novel usage here does not create additional meaning; the reader cannot tell whether it means hard criticism or sycophancy. The following line, 'they pecked at mine last year' does not entirely erase the confusion, and the irony of the following announcement 'we're going

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[1] *Love & Fame* (Afterword)(London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 95.

strong!' suggests the meaning could be anything; either he is scornful of praise or bullish in response to criticism; and so the reader might be left baffled by the poem's conflict between overall clarity and semantic confusion. The closing line, 'She muttered something in my ear I've forgotten as we danced,' seems to be tonally out of place, again suggestive of the Henry idiom, and of the dancing motif of Dream Song 382, the dancer in that case being Death.

In 'Cadenza on Garnette', the poet claims an affinity with 'plain-saying Wordsworth' but belies this with a couple of phrases in the poem whose compactness disguises the depth of their imagery. The first, 'She set up a dazing clamour across this blood,' opening the second stanza, contradicts the Wordsworth quotation (the phrasing suggests Wordsworth never said this) immediately preceding it: ' "If I had said out passions as they were [...] the poems could never have been published."' This statement seems intended to act as a disclaimer, to make the reader think twice about the validity of the confessions he is about to uncover. The problem this raises, however, is that the ironic and Janus-faced proclamations for which Berryman is noted make it difficult for the reader to believe his appreciation of what is attributed to Wordsworth. It was his apparent intention to write about 'solely and simply myself [...] I wiped out all the disguises'[2] . Yet if he agrees with the Wordsworth statement, he cannot be saying out 'passions as they were' or else this collection 'could never have been published'. That he follows this opening stanza with a line as complex as 'She set up a dazing clamour across this blood' suggests a thorough contradiction of his intentions. Setting these intentions aside for the moment, one can extract with relative quickness the lines in these poems that are of intrinsic interest, as the vast majority of this work is purely narrative, without embellishment. The overwhelming thrust of criticism of *Love & Fame* has been against the shamelessness of its confessions, particularly the embarrassing recollections of sexual conquests. Berryman was surely aware of the unreliability of autobiography, since ultimately no text can establish absolutely and unequivocally the truth of past events and merely to

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[2] Stitt, p. 200.

question autobiography in this light raises complex philosophical problems; nor could he be immune from this unreliability, and the events recalled in this collection are coloured by the poet's inescapable subjectivity. George Whiteside believes that the poems are far from the intimate confession that is purported, though his view is also somewhat uncritical:

> It is a glorious work; coyness is gone; the human passions sound and resound throughout it. However, the picture of himself which he painted herein could hardly be the real John Berryman. Instead, he depicted the gargantuan lover and drinker and roaring boy which he had always seen himself as.[3]

Jonathan Galassi, on the other hand, expresses the more common view that 'the "I" of these guilt-motivated recollections is often hysterically one-dimensional'.[4] I would argue that the 'I' here has dimensions, but in a different sense from the 'I' of *The Dream Songs*. While the persona here remains ostensibly a facsimile of Berryman the young poet, that persona is subject to flux; Berryman's persona, while present throughout the collection, is displayed prismatically through reappraisal by the older Berryman, who is by turns mocking, witty or judgmental about his own past. So the reviews of these poems that have been scathing about the rawness of what is recounted have tended to look at the work in the shadow of the more intense and non-sequential use of memory in *The Dream Songs*. Such a critical approach has meant that the elements of the poems that have a significance beyond narrative, that show Berryman's particular grasp of poetic diction, have tended to go unnoticed. What are worth examining in these poems are the moments not governed by the need for prosody or 'plain-saying'. Berryman famously uses apparent wrong words in a phrase. This happens archetypally in *The Dream Songs*, and here in a less outlandish mode. For instance, phrases such as 'dazing clamour' at first seem incongruously constructed, but their sense begins to resound with repeated reading; there seems to be, in such phrases, a submerged meaning, latent in the sound of the word, which despite being grammatically unsuitable or unusual makes an intuited sense. The

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[3] George Whiteside, 'John Berryman's Last Two Years', *New Letters*, 43 (1977),101-104 (p. 101).
[4] Jonathan Galassi, 'Sorrows and Passions of His Majesty the Ego', in *Commentary*, p. 69 (first publ. in *Poetry Nation*, no. 2, 117-120.

instances of this in *The Dream Songs* include phrasing such as 'he bulbed his voice & lectured on some more' (Song 24) or 'A pelican of lies | you loosed' (Song 20). Despite the generally more open style, a similar thing occurs in *Love & Fame* from time to time. The phrasing is more subtle than the voice of the Songs, and partly because of this can go unnoticed. In 'Cadenza on Garnette' the interest lies mainly in the final stanza:

> so that I cut in & was cut in on,
> the travelling spotlights coloured, the orchestra gay,
> without emphasis finally,
> pressing each other's hand as he took over.

The stanza uses the imagery of the ballroom to good effect, achieving a fine rhythmic balance uncluttered by overreaching diction, yet simultaneously using a series of seemingly ungoverned clauses to convey almost a sense of lyrical weightlessness. This sense is heightened by the third line which is the focus for the poem in terms of its lyrical intensity, despite being paradoxical and seemingly meaningless in itself. The paradox lies in the placing of 'emphasis' and 'finally' together, as if to emphasize the emphasis, and then the removal of all that emphasis with 'without'. The descriptions of the spotlights and the orchestra build to a moment of high emotion, which leads the reader to the pivotal third line, then to the anti-climax experienced by the poet, conveyed by the casual way his dancing partner was taken away from him. He and Garnette are 'pressing each other's hand' but their relationship is 'without emphasis finally'.

'Drunks', by suggestion of the title, sounds like a bar room anecdote. Certain recollections within it are shocking in the casualness of their candour:

> I wondered every day about suicide.
> Once at South Kent — maybe in the Third Form? —
> I lay down on the tracks before a train
> & had to be hauled off, the Headmaster was furious.

Even with such openness, a clarity of persona seems as far off as in *The Dream Songs*, and the voice that here contemplates suicide is only as complete as any of the voices of Henry. The poet does not include enough dense, complex poetic material for the

prosody to seem in any sense other than self-evident. We are told of his wondering about suicide, but the poem does not mention his own feelings, or his mother's, but only adds that 'the Headmaster was furious'. Such bluff gives the impression that the poet is being dishonest. Compare this with Dream Song 42 which is also about his father but is markedly different:

> O journeyer, deaf in the mould, insane
> with violent travel & death: consider me
> in my cast, your first son.

This passage is loaded with significance and verbal mystery; while not resorting to the naked style of the *Love & Fame* poem, it expresses a great deal more about poetic persona. His father is seen as a journeyer, travelling beyond his life; he is 'deaf in the mould,' his coffin, unable to hear Henry's ongoing worry. He exhorts his father to 'consider' him, to think of his sense of condemnation to a life as the legacy of a suicide, unable to live in his own 'cast'. By contrast, the poems of *Love & Fame* largely eschew language of such density. In 'Images of Elspeth' the poet writes: 'My love confused confused with after loves I not ever over time did I outgrow', a passage fondly imitating Shakespeare in its sweeping light rhythm and use of repetition. In the midst of the poem's storytelling about 'naked photographs', however, it seems strangely out of place; in fact the notion of naked photographs may be a metaphoric pointer to the purpose of the collection as a whole; the poems are unclothed snapshots of moments of life, in contrast to the Bosch paintings that *The Dream Songs* might be compared with. The caveat of this point is that in their way, photographs can be as deceptive and misleading as poetry or prose.

Perhaps the most ironic poem in the light of this argument is 'Olympus', which recounts the poet's discovery of R. P. Blackmur's edict on poetry, which he quotes verbatim:

> 'The art of poetry
> is amply distinguished from the manufacture of verse
> by the animating presence in the poetry
> of a fresh idiom: language
>
> so twisted & posed in a form
> that it not only expresses the matter in hand

but adds to the stock of available reality.'

Berryman can only show the effect that this passage had on his early career as a poet by reproducing it word for word, not through imitation. In such straightforward quotation, Berryman is performing his vocation of the elegist but in a medium in complete accord with the naked style of *Love & Fame*, without imitation or expressed grief, but emphasizing that the true memorial of the writer is the text he leaves behind; Berryman can only make manifest the power of Blackmur's writing by quoting it, and thereby also expresses his humility at the power of the statement by being unable to improve it through paraphrase. The insertion of personal voice is self-consciously whimsical, reminiscent of Ogden Nash: 'To be a *critic*, ah, I how deeper & more scientific.' After praising the 'high company' of Van Doren and Blackmur, the pinnacle of his academic achievement ('Olympus!'), the poet equates this with the high romance of his time with Jean Bennett. The bathos of this conclusion exaggerates the sense of the high point being the witty line of rhyme quoted above. Like a number of poems in *Love & Fame*, there is a tendency to build a poem to a central moment of significance, the rest being apparently fleshed out with seemingly unfashioned reminiscence.

Because the style in which this reminiscence is presented is so plain, it becomes easy to over-emphasize the importance of those lines which do not merely 'express the matter in hand'. 'Nowhere' has some lines that appear obscure in the way Dream Song lines could appear obscure, but are in fact more straightforward than they seem when placed in their context. The opening sentence, 'Traitoring words,— tearing my thought across I bearing it to foes' seems very knotted but becomes clearer after the following lines: 'Two men ahead of me in the College Study I about the obscurity of my "Elegy: Hart Crane".' Berryman is here employing an initial sentence based around three participles ungoverned by any subject, resolving the confusion this arouses in the subsequent lines describing 'Two men ahead of me in line' without any verb. This technique seems intended to give the poem a unification of construction and sense, portraying the student critics of his works first anonymously, then without

any motivation, rendered impotent through the verblessness of their idling in the queue. This technique is effective in demanding the re-reading of the stanza. However the next stanza employs a similar trick which confuses:

> More comfortable at the Apollo among blacks
> than in Hartley Hall where I hung out.
> A one named Brooks Johnson, with it in for Negroes,
> I told one noon I'd some coon blood myself.

It does not become clear who is 'more comfortable', Berryman or his critics in the queue. The rest of the stanza implies that it is the narrator who is more comfortable since he boasts of being of mixed race. But if so, then he must have 'hung out' at both Hartley Hall and the Apollo, in which case the poet's intention must be to create a sense of inhibition: the young Berryman would like to feel more comfortable at the Apollo, but instead he hangs out at Hartley Hall. In the rest of the poem, Berryman ignores the scornful racism of the campus, delights in the works and lives of great blues performers, but does not follow up the racial theme he initiates. Instead the poem changes gear into a simple but appealing list-poem, recounting the routines, entertainment and memories of the time. While these have little of *The Dream Songs*' craft to them, they are evocative in themselves as unmediated representations of the act of remembering. The poet is not explicitly applying any re-evaluation of the past, he is merely remembering and transcribing these memories, building up, simply, a convincing picture of his day to day life; yet just as Henry's observations and his omissions are telling, so are the voices of the poet here, since clearly we are not told everything about his life at college. In this sense the voice of *Love & Fame* is no different to that of Henry in its presentation of the world. Firstly he remembers the news of the time, then the culture (represented by Cagney, Dietrich and Chaplin), then his pastimes such as 'Ping-Pong', slowly moving the list's references closer to himself, as he recalls a photograph of himself half-dressed, until the memory of the external world moves into the internal world of the poet at work, waiting for inspiration, this being conveyed by the crafted stasis of the eighth stanza:

> pencil on the desk [...]
> coffee in a cup, ash-tray flowing

> the window closed, the universe unforthcoming,
> Being ground to a halt.

This is the poem's epiphany, a moment of simultaneous clarity and depth: the act of memory has provided a poem that circles the poet's youthful world before arriving at this presentation of the poet at his desk, searching for inspiration, observing his surroundings, and the 'universe unforthcoming'. Just as Henry's observations and his omissions are telling, so is the voice of the poet here, since clearly we are not told everything about his life at college. In this sense the voice of *Love & Fame* is no different to that of Henry in its presentation of the world the poet knows.

The poem that follows, 'In & Out', reprises the themes of the preceding poem, including the lists of things fondly remembered: 'Princeton had two complete Sophomore backfields | and took us 19-0'. Such lines appear almost like diary entries, their brevity excluding irony, and seeming to insufficiently explore the self-criticism which Berryman apparently intended for the work; in the Afterword to the second edition of *Love & Fame* he asserts that the collection was 'a whole, each of the four movements criticizing backward the preceding, until part IV wipes out altogether all earlier presentations of the "love" and "fame" of the ironic title'. In the light of such reasoning, the immodesty of the line 'sense of a selfless seeker in this world' in 'In & Out' seems deliberate, given that all such self-importance will be dashed by Part IV. Like most freshmen with artistic ambitions, he was more likely to be selfish than selfless. The rest of the poem tends to bear this out, in his desire to be popular at Columbia, and his empathy with the New York commuters: 'I liked them, a man of the world, I felt like them.' More disconcerting is his apparent pleasure at remembering how, later in life, he caused a woman to 'beat a punching bag with her bare fists until her knuckles bled | cursing with every blow "John Berryman!...John Berryman!"' His use of filmic images here is interesting in light of the idea of 'naked photographs'. He sets up a scene very sparely, like a screenwriter's pitch ('Corridors deep, near water') but the scene remains isolated from the context of the poem, it is simply part of a matinee the poet once attended. Unlike his model, Auden, who, in

'Consider This and In Our Time', pans, zooms, and takes in scenes with ease, Berryman presents merely two-dimensional memory. The matinees, the football scores, and the commuters are all connected but only through temporal proximity, and no attempt is made in the poem to present any unity of theme. Whereas the content of many Dream Songs was equally or even more heterogeneous, the disjointed style and the plurality of Henry was able to accommodate such disparities. In *Love & Fame* there is only one character telling the story, and his similarity to the real Berryman makes the need for irony more important than before. While Berryman may have argued this to be the case, the reproachfulness of Book IV suggests otherwise; if his antics in the first half of the book are presented tongue-in-cheek, there is no reason why he should feel the need to condemn his own behaviour with such bombast later on when he has already done it through the irony of his initial presentation. Haffenden's interesting textual remarks about the collection throw light on this problem of ironic distance:

> Berryman tries to persuade both himself and his audience that the teleological development of the plot was predetermined, and not a matter of hindsight [...] The actual state of affairs differs markedly from such a view. In February and March 1970, Berryman had not yet experienced a moment of divine intervention in his life, and clearly relished the telling of the secular, lubricious autobiography of Parts I and II.[5]

Haffenden suggests that Berryman only withdrew his approval of the 'lubricious' elements of Parts I and II with the hindsight of religious rebirth, and that the attitude of the narrator of this half of the book was not originally intended to be so denounced as he is later on.

Haffenden may be guilty, however, of accepting along with Berryman that Parts I and II consist only of lurid revelations of lust and arrogance. It may be that Berryman himself failed to see the irony and self-consciousness of some of these poems. 'The Heroes' is superior in this respect, combining remembrance of other poets and the characteristic hero-worship of *The Dream Songs*, but replacing the egotistical undertone that crops up elsewhere with a wry reappraisal of his former self.

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[5] *Commentary*, pp. 76-77.

Berryman produces an effective opening stanza, picturing Pound as 'feline' and using this cat motif to set up a line reminiscent of the opening of Eliot's 'Prufrock':

> Pound seemed feline, zeroing in on feelings,
> hovering up to them, putting his tongue in their ear,
> delicately modulating them in & out of each other.

The tone of *The Dream Songs* is suggested in the second stanza, Berryman punning gently on fated and its homonym fêted: 'not fated like his protégé Tom or drunky Jim | or hard-headed Willie for imperial sway.' Phrases like 'drunky Jim' and 'imperial sway' have an unmistakable Henry-like ring to them. Outside *The Dream Songs*, use of its most familiar idiom catches the eye and can take undue control over a poem. In 'The Heroes' there is a strength in the subdued, regretful tone that allows the slang we associate with Henry to coexist with it and provide relevant reflection. The poem is about the poet's artistic development, so the introduction of the earlier voice is a central aid to commentary. From the wisdom of age, the poet looks honestly at his immature early work through the prism of his artistic high point, *The Dream Songs*. He remembers his mental league table of modernists, who were made to compete for the 'administration of the modern soul | in English, now one, now ahead another'. He expresses an easily discernible awareness of how demanding he was as a student and critic, which is not so apparent in other poems in the book, of similar subject matter.

> I had, from my beginning, to adore heroes
> & I elected that they witness to,
> show forth, transfigure [...]
> They had to come on like revolutionaries,
> enemies throughout to accident & chance.

The characteristic that allows the poem to bear comparison with Berryman's use of persona in his earlier work is its subjectivity. The poet is not just reminiscing here, but making the reader sense the poet's self-awareness, who admits finally that he could not make use of his 'gathering reflexions' to improve his poetry, his attitude proving too adversarial to achieve any synthesis of thought, as represented in the language of the poem by his use of 'against':

> These gathering reflexions against young women
> against seven courses in my final term,

I couldn't sculpt into my helpless verse yet.
I wrote mostly about death.

The final line is witty, ironic, and mildly scornful. It is interesting that he appears to be referring to his earliest work, the poetry he wrote at Columbia, but when he says he wrote 'mostly about death' it seems inescapable that he is thinking, at least in part, of *The Dream Songs*, in which death is the subject of ultimate relevance. In this light the irony of the final line may be mixed with a mordant, self-mocking overview of his own career as a poet.

Berryman's willingness to use himself as the core subject for this book of poetry seems to concord far less with his established personal poetics that allowed *The Dream Songs* to be so wide ranging, while still excavating and analysing intensely personal matters. While his attempts to elucidate the meaning or purpose of *The Dream Songs* have always been ambivalent and often misleading, his comments on *Love & Fame*, and indeed the poetry itself, have suggested an urge to mentally excoriate, to purge himself of his past and of the voices he used in the past to articulate. In the Afterword, he notes: 'memory failing, clutching at frantic data of life-achievement, obsessed with a vanishing past of happiness in his present loneliness & age, he moves us after all.'[6] It is worth noting that he uses the word 'data', since many of the poems in *Love & Fame* seem to be just that. The poem 'Crisis' is informative, but crucially lacks a poetic identity. The occasional linguistic inversions typical of *The Dream Songs* here fail to conceal the essential plainness of the material. He writes of a hated lecturer, Professor Emery Neff, 'who also mouthed at me Wordsworth'[7] . To show how eager he is to broach the matter of writing a poem straight from one's diaries, so to speak, the poet presents himself in the act of remembering with the line 'O I come here to a tricky old scandalous affair!' This is a remark of literary playfulness which ought to be noted as a corollary of the deceptiveness of *Love & Fame*. The line quoted seems to be the only self-referential aspect of the poem, the only moment where the image of the poet writing the poem is

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[6] *Love & Fame* (Afterword), p. 95.
[7] *Life* , p. 74.

presented, where the act of artistic creation is re-enacted within the art. For the rest of the poem, the poet tells us in detail about his college grades: 'In my immediate section of the Commencement line | we were mostly Phi Betes, & the normal guys would have nothing to do with us.' He goes on to mention his 'first installment'[8] of finance for Cambridge, and the final stanza's scene-setting for his year in England suggests the poem was indeed no more than one instalment in an autobiography. Yet Kathe Davis argues what seems to be missing from much of the criticism of the collection, that the rules of persona which allowed for the construction of Henry are still operative in *Love & Fame*, and that its recollections cannot be reduced to autobiography even by Berryman.

> It may be less obvious that the naked first person of *Love & Fame*, poems panned because they were so raw, is also a construct. Berryman claimed disingenuously, 'The subject was entirely new, solely and simply myself. Nothing else.' then he marked his claim to self-knowledge as delusion. He read through his entire *Paris Review* interview [...] and starred certain statements of his own as 'Delusion.' The device serves the same function as the Derridean practice of putting 'under erasure' concepts which dissolve under close examination but without which we can't conduct our discourse. Berryman knew that the self was just such a concept.[9]

It is interesting that following the loose and apparently untameable structure of *The Dream Songs*, instalments of which he continued writing after its final publication, Berryman has chosen to rein in all digression and pursue a seemingly accurate and unswerving record of his time as a novice poet and academic. Although Berryman himself and many critics have claimed complex structural principles were made to bear on the unruly *Dream Songs*, I believe that he was prepared to allow a much more organic structure to develop, to allow his inspiration to dominate his sense of order, at least for the time that he was writing, and then to impose a kind of order on the work after its completion, through reordering and pruning of the sequence. He was probably aware that to make his poem thematically and structurally rigid would extinguish some of the qualities that have sustained its interest long after its publication. It is the lack of absolute order that gives *The Dream Songs* its variety. It

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[8] Spelling of 'installment' as in*Collected Poems*; see notes p. 317. On Berryman's spelling see pp. 298-299 of the same.
[9] Davis, p. 50.

is probably the well proportioned and clearly divided sequence of narratives that makes *Love & Fame* a more limited work than its predecessor. As Yeats did in 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', he found it natural to speak in a relatively plain diction, commenting on an earlier self. However, the plainness of this poetry shows that those effects were integral to the content of Berryman's poetry; the language of *The Dream Songs* was inseparable from its substance.

Part Two is perhaps the most unexplored section of the book, critically speaking. The initial lines of 'Away' have a distinctive cadence and depth of expression when describing the ocean liner on which the poet leaves for England: 'Ah! so very slowly I the jammed dock slides away backward.' The immediate sensation conveyed here is not of the ship moving but the earth that it is leaving behind. Although the metaphoric impact of the opening is not thoroughly followed through, the poem has a distinct atmosphere and the certain lines are densely packed, lyrically, not in the style of *The Dream Songs*, but perhaps in a voice closer to that of Lowell's in *Life Studies*. The paradox of a 'jammed' dock that 'slides away' suggests initially the bumping of a ship leaving its dock, and the reinforcement of 'backward' perhaps gives the line a pejorative air, hinting that the dock metonymically represents America, which was to seem culturally 'jammed' for Berryman for some years to come; its importance for him 'slides away' as the significance of American culture is surpassed by his eagerness to discover Yeats and the 'old masters'. There is a similar density to 'now we're swinging round, tugs hoot', which is typical of Berryman in its economical clustering of information into a single deceptively simple line; it is not necessarily metaphorical, but it evokes the entire picture of the ship's departure from the harbour in a brief phrase. The poet also makes effective use of punctuation to denote his rambling thought, flitting between memory and perception, with use of the present tense to compound the temporal uncertainty this daydreaming produces:

> It beats the Staten Island ferry hollow
> I used to take to Clinton Dangerfield
> to type out from dictation her pulp Westerns
> I'm impressed by the *bulk* of the ship

The omission of a full stop at the end of the third line of the stanza evokes the meandering train of thought as the young poet is jolted into a realization about his present state. This sensation is conveyed again in the final stanza; there is no preceding full stop and the space from the previous stanza accentuates the gasp of 'My God we're in open water'. The narrator is brought back from pondering on his status as a poet to an awareness that he is beyond the point of no return, he has no foothold in land. The open water is somehow deepened by the space between the two stanzas. There may also be a biographical undercurrent to the final stanza, recalling the time that Berryman's father swam with his brother out to sea, apparently to drown him[10]:

> I feel like Jacob with his father's blessing
> set forth to con the world too, only *I* plan
> to do it with simple work & with my ear.

The poet compares himself to Jacob, which suggests that his father's legacy somehow demands dishonesty; his father's dishonesty lay perhaps in his suicide. The Jacob stories tend to emphasize divine providence, and it may be that the poet's acceptance of his father's 'blessing' is also an acceptance of his own destiny. On a wider scale, the largely unadorned retelling of his past may be his acceptance of it, as the course of his personal history, which can no longer be changed and which must be confronted in full. Yet the contradiction presented by his intention to 'add to the stock of available reality' leaves Berryman with a dilemma; whether to confront this history without embellishment, or to make use of the transforming language which, through Henry, attempted to understand the nature of fate. For the most part, he elects to do the former, and this results in prosaic anecdote, occasionally lightened by applications of the latter, which take the reader out of the stream of history that the book details, and which isolate moments of significance within a handful of central passages of lyrical intensity. In 'London', for example, the poet appears to expend his energies in

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[10] This episode is one of great confusion and is referred to by Haffenden; it is not clear whether Berryman's father took his brother or him out to sea to deliberately drown him, and Berryman's mother's recollection was muddled by her poor memory and her opinion of her husband (Haffenden, *Life*, p. 24).See also *We Dream of Honour: Berryman's Letters to his Mother* (London: Norton, 1988).p. 279-80.

the first couple of lines: 'his panoramas, | plus my anticipations, made me new.' Referring to his friend Pedro Donga's anecdotes and observations, he suggests that he is reborn in his new experiences, made new. Yet the rest of the poem suggests that his new experiences have had little effect on him. Remarks such as 'that bloody lefthand traffic' and 'I fed at Simpson's' seem like the casual phrases found on a postcard. This is the case for a number of poems in Part Two, such as 'The Other Cambridge', whose depiction of Clare and Cambridge in general sounds oddly like a Baedeker travel guide, notably in its quotation of a description of Tom Grumbold's bridge, '("subtle & very effective")'. The poet shows off his knowledge of literary history, but does nothing with this knowledge other than impart it. The memory of Cambridge is not transformed as it is in many Dream Songs, such as the poems in memory of dead friends, which often create a disturbing atmosphere dramatizing the speaker's state of mind beyond the rational into the fantastic. 'The Other Cambridge' is almost purely a documentation of a memory. The final stanza, in attempting to create the sublime out of the unspectacular, seems melodramatic and incongruous: 'Buildings, buildings & their spaces & decorations, | are death words & sayings in crisis.' Berryman tries to give a dramatic sting to the poem, but the stanza does not suit the style of what goes before it; moreover there is no sense of the poet travelling any further in his mind than he physically travelled in the 'thirties. In other poems it is not the plainness that is problematic, but the poet's subtle manipulation of persona through differing uses of tense and point of view, all of which is concealed behind apparently shapeless narrative. The first part of 'Monkhood' recalls his time in Cambridge in the present tense, the second describes the same time in the past tense, but with harsh hindsight, and a noticeably self-critical stance. It is so harsh on the poet as to imply that he secretly desires praise, which he receives from Delmore Schwartz, who mentions his '"Satanic pride"'. He takes this remark with '*pleasure*' and praises Schwartz for his 'gentle heart & high understanding | of both the strengths & cripplings of men.' But the real subject here is himself, and his standing in the opinions of others, which is a significant commentary on the stance in *The Dream*

Songs, where the poet's sense of self in the context of the lives of others is portrayed as a desperate empathy and mutual experience of emotions. Here he mocks his own youthful arrogance, but still seems blind to his own continuance of it. He admits that 'I suffered a little from shyness, which was just arrogance | not even inverted'. When he subsequently writes 'I knew I wasn't with it yet | & would not meet my superiors. Screw them', the admission of arrogance makes this seem ironic, the indirect voice of the young poet. But later he writes 'many write of me these days & some with insight | but I think of Delmore's remark that afternoon'. This is a strange conceitedness, to consider himself already such a fixture of literature that he is being critically assessed. The confidence of this expression is set against the grave doubts expressed in the final stanza:

> Will I ever write properly, with passion & exactness,
> of the damned strange demeanours of my flagrant heart?
> & be by anyone anywhere undertaken?
> One *more* unanswerable question.

Haffenden thinks this stanza applies to past and present and brings both parts of the poem together:

> It is tactically appropriate that the poem modulates from historic present tense [...] through simple past tense [...] and then back into a present tense [...] which has canny reference to both historical and present predicaments.[11]

Indeed the yearning voice of the final stanza suggests that it is that of the poet in the present, who is still doubtful of his ability to write, and who senses doubt about his entire fate, as the question of his poetry is just 'one *more* unanswerable question'. The same fluctuation between self confidence and grave self-doubt can be found in the following poem, 'Views of Myself', whose title may be a key to the dimensions of the collection's evaluation of the sense of self. He expresses a high opinion of his ability to be cruel with words: 'what I said I said with force & wit | which crushed some no doubt decent & by me now would be spared.' Such a tone gives the reader the uneasy sense that the poet is eager to confess to such cruelty because he is secretly pleased with his own behaviour and bad reputation, which is reinforced by the line, 'take my

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11 *Commentary*, p. 73.

vices alike | with some my virtues, if you can find any.' When he says that 'when I was fiddling later with every wife | on the Eastern seaboard | I longed to climb into a pulpit & confess', the urge to confess seems far to outweigh the sense of regret. Ernest Stefanik suggests that the poet's confessional urge is harmful to his reputation but is a necessity of his artistic development:

> Berryman exposes the past with the objectivity and candor of a disinterested observer, without granting it some romantic grandeur or heroic glory. Instead, the insistent prate about concupiscence and renown create the image of the poet as a foolish victim.[12]

The confessional urge of these poems is certainly problematic but may be solved by Stefanik's notion of a 'disinterested observer'. Berryman has in this collection dispensed with the switching of pronouns for the poems' self, but this does not mean that the subterfuge of persona has been jettisoned also. One might argue instead that having exposed the spuriousness of the 'I', Berryman has taken up its use again in the knowledge that simple omniscience and a solitary conscience cannot be taken for granted. The multiplication of selves in *Love & Fame* is temporal, the older Berryman observing partially the life of the young Berryman, with the accumulated thoughts and sensations of several Berrymans in between adding to the construction of reminiscence. The simplicity of expression does not necessarily discount such organizational intricacy, since it may be seen as working at a largely intuitive level. Berryman shows concern to apply an explicit pattern to the work wherever he can, but undertones that provide more lasting patterns can show through; 'Transit' has a useful structure and purpose, the title representing transit from 'Friendless', an earlier poem of this part, to 'Meeting', the next poem. His attempts at making friends echo the similar attempts made at a correspondent point in Part One, in 'In & Out'. However, the movement in the final stanza from personal themes to political and historical is incomplete, since the casualness of tone cannot be placed in the context of a sympathetic overture or strong sense of irony; the preceding passages are morally featureless, and therefore do not prepare the reader for the bleak recollection of the

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[12] Ernest C. Stefanik, 'A Cursing Glory: John Berryman's *Love & Fame*', in *John Berryman*, pp. 35-48 (p. 42) (first publ. in *Renascence*, 25.3 (1973)115-127).

Spanish student who 'killed himself, I never heard why | or just how, it was something to do with a bridge'. In 'Meeting', he details his romantic progress at Cambridge with a carefully designed casualness that barely conceals the high emotion inherent in the subject matter: 'One luncheon party in Andy's rooms in Magdalene | was dominated by a sort of a beauty of a queen.' The imprecision of 'sort of a beauty' deflates the sublimity of the picture, but simultaneously suggests the line to be an ironic understatement. The poet's infatuation becomes apparent later on: 'I couldn't drink my sherry, I couldn't eat. | I looked; I listened.' But when the conversation at the party turns to Shakespeare, the older poet's historical viewpoint is keen to stress his younger self's superior knowledge of the subject:

> I don't think I said a word, although I knew
> (as probably no one else there did)
> the chance is good he wrote *Love's Labours*
> for the Earl & his friends down there in '93.

This begs the question of whether the poet was more humble at the time of the incident or the time of the poem. In his Afterword, Berryman sees the protagonist of the poems as a 'distasteful braggart',[13] but does not specify whether he means the young poet whose antics are detailed in Parts One and Two, or the older narrator, whose reflections form the moral standpoint of the work. The moral attitude of the work is not clear-cut, but it is made more distinct by the gravity of the second half's reevaluations. This second section, particularly Part Four, attempts to dismiss all judgement that has gone before, replaced by an urge towards complete faith in the will of God.

This urge begins to take hold almost immediately, as in 'The Search'. While still using recollection, the poet moves away from the straightforward narratives of the previous two parts, into a poetry more reminiscent of Berryman's previous work, coining novel expressions such as 'after-fame', using a more dramatic range of diction, in accord with the assumed morality of the religion-based subject matter; at the same time he mingles this elevation with the comic bathos common in *The Dream*

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13 *Love & Fame* , Afterword, p. 95.

Songs. Recalling a tooth-extraction, he produces the rhapsodic line, reminiscent of *Hamlet*, 'I dreamed a dream to end dreams, even my dreams.' In the main body of the poem he shows off his considerable knowledge of religious literary material, as well as his thirst for devotion: 'I was weak on the Fourth Gospel. I still am, I in places; I plan to amend that.' The insistence of the poet's desire to be converted suggests that the conversion is willed, and hopeful, rather than a natural transformation. The doubtfulness of the poet's faith here is exacerbated by the unconvincing denial of the following poem, 'Message'. The poet tells us that 'I am not writing an autobiography-in-verse, my friends'. The central problem inherent in such a statement is that it contradicts the other assertions that Berryman has made about the collection's authorship, persona, and biography. If, as he asserts in his Afterword, the character of the poems is 'he' and not 'I', then the denial quoted above becomes irrelevant and disingenuous. If this is only the poet-character denying autobiography, then the position of the actual poet remains unclear. In this sense, the Afterword becomes part of the smoke screen that Berryman apparently wanted to create around the questions of authorship that were equally common to *The Dream Songs*, where Berryman insisted that Henry was 'not the poet, not me'.[14] Haffenden's remarks about this poem's second stanza are notable in this respect: 'In "Message", he supplied the phrase which begins the second stanza — "Impressions, structures, tales" — after rejecting a draft version, "Impressions, facts".'[15] The conclusion at which Haffenden arrives, however, is that 'the change implicitly concedes the truth that he was not attempting verisimilitude'.[16] I would argue, rather, that Berryman was employing here a kind of editorial conceit, designed not to emphasize the difficulty of establishing truth, but to conceal a fundamental difficulty the poet experiences in accepting his own history. The omission of 'facts' from the line only becomes noticeable of course with Haffenden's detailing of the poem's composition. Without this, the reader would not be expected to read the line and feel that the poet ought to have written 'facts'

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[14] *The Dream Songs* (Note), p. vi.
[15] *Commentary*, p. 76.
[16] ibid., p. 76

instead of 'tales'. Berryman's removal of 'facts' can be seen as part of his statements of distanced persona. The reasons for Berryman's insistence on this are confusing; if he is genuinely concerned about the coincidence of poet and persona, then his constant assertions otherwise lead the cynical critic to believe he has something to hide, or is suffering from an artistic paranoia, a fear that if this coincidence were true, then his human personality would be subsumed into the life of his literary creations, a kind of Keatsian negative capability. In a quite separate sense, the content of this poem has a thematic coherence, in that the poet has reached the point where he is discussing what he has written so far before he has completely finished, which conforms to his theory of each part criticizing the part preceding it. But this correctness does not deflect the reader from the coyness of the narrator's denials, who claims that 'I don't remember why I sent this message', when to admit to such uncertainty is to concede the weakness of his original message about autobiography-in-verse. Similarly the zeal of the conversion expressed in 'The Search' is contradicted by the nadir of existential resignation of the final stanza here:

> We will all die, & the evidence
> is: Nothing after that.
> Honey, we don't rejoin.

The finality that this implies makes the earlier assertion of faith seem unconvincing. While the poet makes it difficult to assess the persona that is presented in these poems, the thematic structure of this Part is in far better shape. In 'Relations', the opening stanza bears comparison with the young poet's attempts to make friends at Columbia and Cambridge: 'I feel congruity, feel colleagueship | with few even of my fine contemporaries | Cal, Saul, Elizabeth.' The poem has the elegiac tone of *The Dream Songs*, but with an added purity of diction in places, and with less emphasis on the sense of vicarious, brotherly suffering, and more on a feeling of quiet desolation. The poet talks in a slightly selfish manner of how 'Bhain Campbell was extracted from me | in dolour, yellow as a second sheet'. He observes bleakly the needless waste of life in Jarrell's mysterious death: '*Losses!* as Randall observed | who walked into a speeding car | under a culvert at night in Carolina | having just called his wife to

make plans for the children.' The bleakness turns into scorn and contempt for the irritating constancy of 'Woe': 'Woe quotidian, woe a crony | glowing on the pillow, talkative.' The poet's relief from this constant sadness takes the form of a dubiously self-regarding celebration of poets still alive:

> Miss Bishop, who wields a mean lyric [...]
> since Emily Dickinson only Miss Moore is adroiter,
> addressed me in her first letter to me as 'John'
> saying 'Surely I may? as if we were friends.
> I wrote you a fan-letter twenty years ago.'

To recall one's own fan-mail, after the mordant gloom of the lines preceding this seems to be a glaring incongruity. Unexpected movement between disparate subjects is a familiar aspect of Berryman's work, and his change of tack here seems to confirm that despite its clarity, *Love & Fame* is as multi-voiced as *The Dream Songs*. The following poem suggests that he is quite aware of this inconstancy, and far from apologizing, makes it a virtue. Even the title, 'Antitheses', makes reference to this vacillation. The poem takes a wider view, to portray this inconstancy as fundamental to poets who are 'unable to make up our mind like a practical man | about *anything*'. The uncertainty extends to the poets' audience, when Berryman injects a remark, humorously aware of the problems modern poetry presents for its readers: 'Nobody can make head or tail of us.' His only concession to practicality is to give his address: 'I live at 33 Arthur Ave. S.E. | & mostly write from here.' In an important but seemingly insignificant closing stanza, Berryman isolates part of the book's thematic progressions:

> My rocking chair is blue, it's in one corner
> & swivels, as my thought drifts.
> My wife's more expensive patchquilt rocker
> is five feet away & does not swivel.

The poet's mind wanders as he looks around at the features of a settled, comfortable, middle-aged existence, quite different from that pictured in the 'coffee in a cup, ash-tray flowing' of Part One's 'Nowhere'. The wandering mind of the earlier poem is part of a memory, an attempt to become a poet; in 'Antitheses', the finished poet has

become a fully rounded existence, and to justify this he provides evidence of his surroundings, and of his ability to write poetry. Where the early passage conveyed impatience, this stanza conveys boredom, a sense of what to do now that the poetry has caught up with the poet. This boredom does not create internal artistic problems, but provides a thematic continuity, that is, the act of writing becomes more pronounced throughout the book, until it reaches a moral apex with the finality of criticism that Part Four is intended to represent. The essential difference, in this respect, between *Love & Fame* and its predecessor, is that while *The Dream Songs* involves a present-time self that is constantly changing and responding to events and thoughts as they occur during the composition of the work, *Love & Fame* depicts persona as a *fait accomplit*, using the intended objectivity of an external voice to the tension of dialogue that is absent in poetry of a solitary 'I'. The voices of dialogue in the poems here are the voice of the remembering poet and the poet existing within those memories. Just like Henry's friend, the remembering voice of the poems takes the moral high ground in Book IV, reproachfully confronting a series of issues with noticeable vehemence and candour. 'Have a Genuine American Horror-&-Mist on the Rocks' recalls the Dream Songs 'The Lay of Ike' and 'Vietnam' in its violent satire and rage at government indifference. The insanity of official secrecy is exposed in the manner of *Catch 22*:

> Nobody *knows anything*
>
> but somewhere up in the murky constellation
> of Government & the scientists & the military
> responsible to no-one someone knows
> that he too doesn't know anything.

In 'Damned' he portrays the act of adultery graphically and unflinchingly. He initially seems to attempt an empathy with the woman of the affair: 'Damned. Lost & *damned.* And I find I'm pregnant.' This empathy does not seem to last long, nor does it soften the harshness of his descriptions: 'She wept all thro' the performance.' That he sees it as a performance is an unsettling allusion to the speaker of poetry, and while he makes a mockery of himself, he is just as cruel to the woman: 'She had a small

mustache but was otherwise gifted.' He claims to be 'scared and guilty', but the actions he describes suggest that he overlooked his guilt for the sake of satisfaction. Moreover he seems quite insensitive to her distress: 'I turned my head aside | to avoid her goddamned tears, | getting in my beard.' The thematic and moral purpose that lies behind this tale may be that the extremity of the confession is intended to counterbalance the extremity of the subsequent redemption of 'this distasteful braggart'.

'Of Suicide' has a similar deliberate casualness, its tone almost like the voice of a maniacal Molly Bloom as the poem follows the rambling thought of the narrator moving with apparent ease from the intense desperation of his 'reflexions on suicide' to wondering whether to give his planned lecture: 'I may teach the Third Gospel | this afternoon. I haven't made up my mind.' The apparent irrelevance of this is deceptive. The inability to make up his mind about his lectures reflects upon his inability to decide whether to live or die, to be or not to be; his inability to decide whether to lecture on the Bible is also perhaps emblematic of the struggle with faith which the poet | narrator endures through this section of the book. In this sense, the conclusion at which the poem arrives is not, as in *Ulysses*, 'yes' or 'no', but 'later'. He accepts that this is a 'damned serious matter', but his wandering thought, which climactically returns to suicide at the end of the poem, is part of his plan for dealing with his morbid obsession; by thinking other things he can postpone the moment where he must confront his suicidal urge. Instead of coming to a decision about his life, and death, he makes another decision: 'I'll teach Luke.' His uncertainty about death is reiterated and explored from a slightly different angle in 'Dante's Tomb'. The title clearly has greater significance because of the occupant of the tomb, and this subject is echoed a number of times later in *Love & Fame*. The poet here sounds blocked and depressed, unable to motivate himself. This torpor is shown by the verbless opening line: 'A tired banana & an empty mind | at 7 a.m.' The poet makes use of italics, rather than linguistic emphasis, to make the central point of the poem, insisting that 'we don't *know*'. The tomb he describes excludes the living, and at the same time

excludes any answers to its secrets. The final stanza implies that once he has accepted that 'I will die' he can continue thinking about the pleasures of life:

> She said to me, half-strangled: 'Do that again.
> And then do the other thing.'
> Sunlight flooded the old room
> & I was both sleepy & hungry.

While the mention of sex in other poems might be argued as a moral descent given the book's religious context, here it presents a powerful memory of a moment of pleasure, which is significantly in the past tense. This use of tense seems intended to remind the reader that the revelations of the poet's lascivious youth in Parts One and Two were only memories, and that what the poet has to deal with in the present is quite different. The historic nature of the image, and its attractiveness is emphasized by the emotional depth to which the next poem sinks; the contrast is made harder by the juxtaposition. 'Despair' seems in its depiction of self-pity to satisfy once more the book's structural and thematic principle: that the poet has to be seen to suffer before he can experience any redemption. 'Despair' refers to an old Dream Song, and contains snatches of Dream Song-like language:

> I certainly don't think I'll last much longer.
> I wrote: 'There may be horribles.'
> I increase that.
> (I think she took her little breasts away.)

The final line above is obscure and incongruous, nor is there any bearing on the rest of the poem. It may suggest that the sexual daydreaming of 'Damned' does not leave the poet even at his lowest emotional point. When he reaches this point, he calls not for God, but first for Whitman:

> Walt! We're downstairs,
> even you don't comfort me
> but I join your risk my dear friend & go with you.
> There are no matches
>
> Utter, His Father, one word.

The line 'There are no matches' suggests that he sees no equal to Whitman; when he does refer to God it is in a very indirect sense, 'His Father', which is clearly

significant for Berryman and his use of the theme of God and Father. The mental and spiritual fracture of this poem leads to the insanity portrayed in 'The Hell Poem' and 'Death Ballad'. These poems once again recall the substance of certain Dream Songs, such as 54 ('No Visitors') and 134, in the transmission of the subject of sickness, mental and physical. Once again these poems seem to act more as structural necessities than individual works. Berryman always insisted that *The Dream Songs* was a single poem, but nevertheless some Songs are more feted critically than others, and that collection does not rely on an explicit narrative sequence as *Love & Fame* does. The use of certain key words in *Love & Fame* seems systematic and intentional. In 'Purgatory', for instance (continuing the references to Dante), the poet says that 'the days are over'. This echoes the end of 'The Hell Poem', whose final line is 'I am staying days'. This line implies that the poet's time on earth is limited, and he is counting in days rather than months or years. In 'Purgatory', the feeling of imminent doom has passed, and the poet is discharged from hospital 'after breakfast | with fifteen hundred things to do at home'. Instead of agonizing about how long he has left, he begins to live for the moment: 'I made just now my new priority list.' The sense of release and rebirth is followed through in 'Heaven'. This poem isolates what appears to be the moment of initial redemption: 'I bowed my face | & licked the monument.' His licking of the monument in Seville Cathedral represents the sublimation of his former mania into unequivocal worship. At the same time it is worship that suits Berryman's poetic persona — he licks the monument rather than touching it or bowing before it, and as the poem continues he recalls a simultaneous physical and spiritual love, written in exaltant tones: 'I was in love with her, | she was half with me. Among the tombs. | She married before she died, | a lissom light-haired alluring phantastic young lady.' That she married suggests an adulterous love, that was doomed to fail, the suggestion supported by its setting 'among the tombs'. The reason the redemption may not be complete is perhaps the personal element, the sense of intimate loss, the need for self-sacrifice. The longing expressed in the need to 'let her sing on' exposes a lingering inability to relinquish earthly life. Berryman's

deliberate patterning of theme across poems of differing moods and subjects is most notable in this Part, and its climax comes in 'The Home Ballad', which more resembles an actual song than any of the Dream Songs, in its jaunty rhythm and refrains. The sense of resolution at the end of this poem, its referential nature, may be explained by the important textual comment by Haffenden, that Book IV was conceived almost as an afterthought:

> The structure of *Love & Fame* was not in any way predetermined but corresponds to a radical change in Berryman's outlook which took place during the period of composition. For that reason, the ironic structure of the work should be regarded as adventitious, not as prescriptive.[17]

While the public must accept the author's publication in the form it appeared, Haffenden's remarks are significant in reviewing the manner of the transformation the poet experiences, and may answer some of the critical questions posed on initial critical reception of the book. Whether 'The Home Ballad' was intended to close the collection or not, it is clear it forms a climax of a number of aspects of the work. The peak of *Love & Fame*'s textual cleverness is reached in the last stanzas, where the text refers to its own publication:

> *Now* my book will go to friends—
> women & men of wit—
> Xerox'd before we publish it, it,
> the limited edition & the public it,
> before we publish it.

The final stanza suggests that Berryman clearly meant this to be the end, in its announcement of the book's title, and emphasis on its completion:

> It's *Love & Fame* called honey Kate,
> you read it from the start
> and sometimes I reel when you praise my art
> my honey almost hopeless angry art,
> which was both our Fate—

The poet seems to reach a satisfying conclusion in that he accepts his fate, which is his 'almost hopeless angry art' but includes his wife, so that it constitutes a fate to love and to create, which the poet is clearly happy enough to come to terms with that

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[17] ibid. p. 70

he can sing about it.

After the cynicism, despair and subsequent release and sense of atonement conveyed by Part Three, the naked adoration that announces 'Eleven Addresses to the Lord' seems hard to accept with complete sincerity. His invocations seem almost fawning and occasionally comical: 'Master of beauty, craftsman of the snowflake, | inimitable contriver, | endower of Earth so gorgeous & different from the boring moon.' The bathos and incongruity of this seems to show the author as ignorant of the irony of what has gone before it, as does the later line, 'Unknowable, as I am unknown to my guinea pigs.' Berryman seems unaware of the humour inherent in such low comparisons. His prayers have a more serious incompleteness in the hint of heretical discord in certain lines; he reminds God that 'you have allowed my brilliant friends to destroy themselves'. He is aware of His indifference but remains faithful. Yet there is a hint of distrust, or at least bafflement, in the closing stanza: 'Whatever your end may be, accept my amazement.' His adoration here seems unconvincing enough that he feels aggrieved at the inexplicable nature of divine actions, which makes his offer of 'amazement' somewhat ambivalent. The 'Addresses' are peppered with such uncertainties, which in the context of the ordered construction of the rest of the book become inconsistencies, evidence of confusion on the part of the poet, when Part Three would lead the reader to believe he had to some extent resolved his difficulties by confronting them. In '2', he appears to address the complex issue of God's creation of the godless, but passes through it without analysis. Instead his greater concern, which underlies Part Four but is never fully resolved, is the indifference of God to human suffering:

> yours the lost souls in ill-attended wards,
> those agonized thro' the world
> at this instant of time, all evil, men,
> Belsen, Omaha Beach,—[...]
> incomprehensible to man your ways.

Similarly in '4' he ominously reminds God:

> horrors accumulate, the best men fail:
> Socrates, Lincoln, Christ mysterious.
> Who can search Thee out?

The faith expressed in these pages is difficult and unsatisfactory, and we must assume that it closely resembles Berryman's real faith at the time of writing. The absence of ironic distance is certainly retrospectively critical of the rest of the work, but it brings the voice of the poet closer to the voice of the man himself. The wilfulness of his desire to express absolute faith makes these late poems slaves to belief more than demonstrations of craft and vision. The vision they exhibit is largely borrowed and archaic. The language of the 'Addresses' is heavily dependent on that of the King James Bible, but in '2' the poet admits that this language has no power to galvanize his faith: 'I say "Thy kingdom come," it means nothing to me.' The tone of disdain for his own shortcomings is so stern and humourless that it fails to address the ever-present self-mockery of those passages it dismisses. In '3', he urges God to protect him from his own urges: 'guard me | against my flicker of impulse lust: teach me | to see them as sisters & daughters.' He is desperate to avoid lecherous lapses, but in guarding against this the poet comes across as insincere, considering the prior relish taken by Henry in promiscuous abandon, and moreover his gritty acquaintance with damnation in full knowledge of his own failings. Interestingly the culmination of this prayer is a request for God to 'unite my various soul'. This may be a prayer for an end to the schizophrenic dysfunction that beset the poet of *The Dream Songs*. He attempts to show that his prayer is being answered by closing the poem with a passage of formal unity, simply repeating with modification the opening line. The fourth poem of the section expresses the strongest doubts yet, where the poet wonders 'if I say Thy name, art Thou there? It may be so'. He seems to remain unconvinced that God is concerned for his creation, but instead of explicitly voicing this doubt, the poet assumes that it is so: 'You attend, I feel, to the matters of man.' He is not sure, he can only 'feel' that God is benevolent. A more telling discovery comes in the third stanza, where it appears Berryman may have experienced his conversion as a result of alcoholic hallucinations, which he compares to the visions of Isaiah & Pascal: 'I dare not ask for that vision, though a piece of it | at last in crisis was vouchsafèd me. | I

altered then for good, to become yours.' He posits points of crisis as moments of religious transformation. In '6', he recalls that the suicide of his father destroyed his faith, and caused the shattering of persona from which he has only now recovered: 'My double nature fused in that point of time | three weeks ago day before yesterday.' He is implying here that his 'various soul' has been united, and that his acceptance of a universal Father has allowed him to accept the death of his own, and implicitly the deaths of others whose memory he served in the elegiac aspect of *The Dream Songs*. In terms of the poetic persona Berryman presents through his work, this resolution fits perfectly with the 'departure' that came 'thereafter', and the birth of the ubiquitous, protean Henry, representing the poet's 'double nature', and the fusing of this persona through the exhaustive self-analysis conducted in *Love & Fame*. For the purposes of the book itself, however, Part Four seems to reopen what had been resolved in the final poems of Part Three, which clearly trace a process of torment, salvation and acceptance. The 'Addresses' seem to express a dissatisfaction amidst the urge to have faith. While Berryman writes, in '8', that 'I do not understand, but I believe', he seems spiritually incomplete in the selfishness he expresses in '9': 'Surprise me on some ordinary day | with a blessing gratuitous.' Such a sardonic tone in this context is emblematic of this section's unresolved anomalies. Berryman seems unsure about what role Part Four plays in the development of the persona of *Love & Fame*. He suggests in the Afterword that the book explores an ongoing obsession of his: 'namely, the dissolving of one personality into another without relinquishing the original.'[18] What seems to have happened in Part Four is that the original has indeed been relinquished, not in the sense of surrendering to simple autobiography, but in allowing his projection of a persona to be demonstratively controlled by his personal need for spiritual reformation. Far from allowing himself to be sacrificed to his creative self, Berryman has returned to an original, unguarded self, but does not allow that voice to criticize itself through the abundant irony inherent in it. Part Four does not 'criticize backward', instead it ignores the unholy revelations of the original

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18 *Love & Fame*, Afterword, p. 95.

sections, and employs an arcane language, somehow alien to the voice projected in the rest of the book, to portray an actual conversion, however unconvincing. The first three parts of the book re-deploy shreds of the poet's past allowing the reader to enact a two-way evaluation of the poet, as a young man through his colourful past, observed with the assiduous interpretation of hindsight, and as a mature writer through those same observations and in the conclusion his assembled past life leads him to in the later part of the book. *Love & Fame* adheres well to a thematic pattern, but its excoriating presentation of self and the forcing of redemption sits uneasily with the liveliness of self-commentary and ironic self-pity to which the reader of his earlier work is accustomed. Nevertheless the inevitability of its subject matter and its chronology suggests that despite its mistakes, its personal necessity came to make it seem an exorcism: not an autobiography in verse, but psychotherapy in verse; in that sense, Berryman had to write it, and in doing so compiled a form of memorial to a past self responsible for much of the social, psychical and emotional material that drove his greatest work, and perhaps partly led to his personal downfall.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to identify the poetry of mourning in *The Dream Songs*, to define the extent to which Berryman's elegiac mode in this has extended the precepts of that tradition. I have tried furthermore to show the extent to which elegy pervades Berryman's fundamental poetics, and that this extent is part of what makes his construction of elegy distinctive. As Jerold Martin has noted, in the context of his study to which I referred in Chapter Five, Berryman's specific voice entails a representation of meaning not through the prism of language, but with language constituting meaning, and all attendant poetic patterns arising from this integrality:

> In Berryman, as in many structuralist analytical approaches, form is inextricably linked with content. In order to express his condition of fragmentation and produce his own mirror object, Berryman needed a writing form as fragmented as his life.[1]

Just as form is linked with content, so elegy is inextricably linked with the fragmentation that this linkage represents. The incompleteness of Henry, his language, what he has to say, and of his persona is emblematic not simply of the fragmented life of the poet, but of the mourner who cannot resolve his grief, who lives through the everyday viewing it as a sour perspective on the matters of life and death that torment him. This is also the torment of the elegist, who creates art out of grief, and displays this torment in the tension in his work between the poetic 'I' and the mourned as figured in the elegy. Berryman's use of Henry seems to epitomize the conflict, crucial to elegy, between its essential literariness and its universal trauma.

To initially illustrate this distinction I have, in Chapter One, looked at the work of other elegists in relation to that of Berryman; those which may be considered as central to the canon and which best illustrate the difference in Berryman's approach to poetry of mourning. In 'Lycidas', we can see the essential patterns of elegy to which most subsequent developments in the tradition may be traced back, but from

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[1] Jerold M. Martin, 'Things Are Going to Pieces: Disintegration Anxiety and *The Dream Songs*', in *Recovering Berryman*, ed. by Richard J. Kelly and Alan Lathrop (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 197.

which Berryman seeks to deviate in fundamental ways. As Douglas Bush notes, the element of euphemistic mask in 'Lycidas' is crucial for pastoral elegy:

> One main reason for the very long life of the pastoral convention, both in the elegy and in its other branches, was that from the beginning it had been a dramatic mask for any kind of utterance, private or public; behind any established and impersonal pattern and persona the poet enjoyed complete freedom.[2]

The correlation between this view and the position of *The Dream Songs*, which is not immersed in a pastoral tradition, is the notion of the mask as the formal means by which the poet can express what may otherwise have remained unsaid. Berryman's use of Henry may be considered a kind of mask, but through the comparisons with Freud's analysis of 'Dora' as discussed in Chapter Five I have tried to show that the mask of Henry does not derive directly from any concept of pastoral elegy but from a notion of the elegiac as the specific product of psychological jarring and shattering that the experience of death produces. I drew comparisons in that section with Steven Marcus' descriptions of Freud's case history and the character, structure and theme of *The Dream Songs*, notably the 'scandalous intentions of the author and the outrageous character of the role he has had the presumption to assume'.[3] Berryman has had the presumption to assume the role of elegist, his very language based upon 'the epistemology of loss', the mental reliving of the losses which have defined his character, a sense of tragic causality.[4] In Song 243 Henry deals with this morbidly obsessive rehearsal of his own demise, and his realization of mortality through the typical language of Henry:

> An undead morning. I . . . shuffle my poss's.
> Lashed here, with ears, in the narrows, memoried,
> like a remaining man,
> he call to him for discomfort blue-black losses,
> gins & green girls, drag of the slaying weed.
> Just when it began again
>
> I will remember, soon. All will be, soon.
> the little birds are crazed. Survive us, gulls.
> A hiss from distant space

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[2] Douglas Bush (ed.), *Milton: Poetical Works*, rev. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 141.
[3] Marcus, p. 64.
[4] 'The Ball Poem'in *Collected Poems*, p. 11.

homes in the overcast—to their grown tune—
dead on my foaming galley. Feel my pulse.
Is it the hour to replace my face?

Dance in the gunwales to what they cannot hear
my lorn men. I bear every piece of it.
Often, in the ways to come,
where the sun rises and fulfils their fear,
unlashed, I'll whistle bits.
Through the mad Pillars we are bound for home.

The language and position of Henry set out here I believe prefaces the main points of my conclusion; chiefly the union of Henry as a character, a form of poetic discourse and a medium for expression of meaning beyond his awareness as a character, particularly his understanding of death. His situation as an unhappy survivor is here in the first stanza: the 'remaining man' whose punishment is to be 'memoried'. The ironic and simultaneously symbolic distancing of character through pronouns is here when 'he call to him for discomfort blue-black losses'. From outside himself Henry can suggest that he 'wills' discomfort, the experience of loss, on himself as a sort of masochistic torture, and as a joke centring around the notion of Henry willing such things to happen, when in fact he has no control over events at all. Furthermore, Berryman gives some room for uncertainty and multiple interpretation which expresses at once the unity of language and meaning in the poem as a whole and the centrality of elegy to that meaning. By using 'he' and then 'him' rather than 'himself', Berryman introduces the possibility that 'he' is an external figure, whom Henry can neither oppose nor understand, and may be considered as the controller of Henry's actions, the poet/creator who guides the narrative of his character and dictates his moods, and from Henry's point of view the god of his world who not only controls Henry but dictates the action around him, the death of his friends; he brings upon Henry 'blue-black losses'. Henry's partial awareness of his fate is shown in his hope for final understanding and consequent resolution of his existence: 'I will remember, soon. All will be, soon.' He will remember those parts of his personality that have been concealed, both from himself and the narrator, just as Freud conceals parts of his own and Dora's personality from the reader and even from himself; and as the

mourner, or rather the melancholic, who conceals parts of his personality from himself until such time as he can resolve his grief back into a recovered whole persona. Meanwhile Henry wonders if this time has already arrived: 'Feel my pulse. | Is it the hour to replace my face?' Elsewhere the Song suggests the nightmarish menagerie of ghosts that surround Henry and the effect this has of making Henry feel, in a sense, already dead. In 'An undead morning. I . . . shuffle my poss's.' With the gothic horror flavour of many other Songs, Henry sets himself in an 'undead morning' comparable to his visits to the 'violent dead'(88) and their encircling of him in 'limp postures'(146), here punning on the word 'morning', in the context of the 'undead'. Like the desperate card player out of luck, Henry shuffles his 'poss's', his possibilities, or rather possible ways to escape his fate, in the hope his hand will seem better. There is a similarly crucial pun in the second stanza which subtly marries the Song's nautical metaphors, in this case the ship which represents his life, mind or soul, and the discomfort of the elegist as one who uses death for literature: 'A hiss from distant space | homes in the overcast—to their grown tune— | dead on my foaming galley.' A 'hiss', a theatrical note of disapproval, picks out the dead who have gradually collected in Henry's ship of Songs, and as the Songs to the dead have increased so their tune has grown. The author of the hiss may once again be Henry as aggrieved and betrayed mourner, or the poet | creator who is voicing an external anger in the form of the elements plaguing the journey of Henry's metaphorical ship. Also, the dead are accumulating on 'my foaming galley', which is part of Henry's ship, but also implies a proof stage of his mourning text, 'foaming' or brimming over with elegies to the dead. So in the very texture of Henry's diction, the nuance of its idiosyncracies, Berryman is attempting to epitomize grief in the language of poetry.

In Chapter One I also looked at the ways that Shelley, in *Adonais*, drew greater attention in the midst of pastoral disguise to the organic sense of rebirth and renewal that such intense contemplation of death brings about, and that his form of mourning involves a level of iconoclasm through emphasis on earthly existence that belies pastoral elegy's incorporation of Christian consolation. Shelley sees that

Adonais 'hath awakened from the dream of life'(XXXIX, l.2), but this comment is at once both consolatory euphemism and part of a veiled attack on the value of human life. This attitude is carried through by Berryman to a more aggressive extreme, openly expressing a desire to join the dead. But where Shelley appears to couch this desire in the language of Christian sacrifice, taking the place of those one mourns, Berryman's poetics of elegy in this respect involves a more explicit urge to find death as a release from the mania of perpetual grief, as illustrated in Song 91 (discussed in Chapter Four), where the disinterred Henry attempts to re-enter his own grave: 'digging like mad, Lazarus with a plan.'

While I have further stressed the structural and other similarities between their uses of elegy, I have in Chapter One noted the particular movement by Berryman away from the consolation which ultimately resolves Tennyson's *In Memoriam.* Nevertheless, Tennyson's notable expressions of religious uncertainty, along with the alignment of his poetics with the essence of mourning makes for useful comparison. In fact Tennyson's expressions of faith do the most to suggest this uncertainty, the notion of 'Believing where we cannot prove' carrying a repressed scepticism along with it, lending equivocation to the elegy's perceived acceptance of Hallam's death. Like *The Dream Songs*, *In Memoriam* is notable for its changing moods, bringing with them shifts of subject matter, always however centring around the understanding and anticipated acceptance of loss. But whereas Tennyson's subject matter shifts on to an external standing, in the sense of the empathetically viewed 'tears of the widower'(XIII), Berryman views mourning with growing internalization, not identifying with the mourner in any kind of universalizing dialogue, but with the dead themselves. Tennyson's recurring doubts and vacillations between anger and consolation derive essentially from a single confused voice. Berryman brings this kind of doubt into sharper relief by using discrete voices which enact the uncertainty of Henry's loss-engendered persona. This method realizes an awareness of the transparency of literature as mourning — reflecting on one's own mortality via an external object that no longer exists other than in one's own consciousness.

As noted in Chapter One, *In Memoriam* might be seen as a struggle to retain faith, *The Dream Songs* as a struggle to discover it. For Tennyson faith is injured by the seemingly meaningless loss that is endured through his elegy. For Berryman, God is objectified as a focus of his anger at his numerous losses and ultimately the cosmic and also very personal disaffection of which Henry is the product. Henry does not resolve this disaffection or the doubts which plague both Berryman's and Tennyson's elegies, despite their hints at the hope of regeneration. While Tennyson uses the repetitive, cyclic nature of mourning to shape his elegy, with a basically singular self at the core of the work, Berryman uses Henry to question the certainty of self in grief. The loss of friends is represented in the essential structure of his work in the loss of a coherent persona.

The relationship between the mourning voice and the essential structure of mourning poetry has a similar relevance with regard to Whitman. Whereas Whitman, in his work as a whole, combines disparate subject matter through an inclusive voice, Berryman sets jarring internal voices against each other for specific effects. Whitman's sense of elegiac identification through persona is in accordance with his poetics, involving the observance of others with a sense of community and a spiritual association. Berryman uses Henry not only to observe others but, to an extent, to become them. This identification arises from the idea, literally of a 'Song of Myself', poetry that is not devised to transmit a social kind of empathy but a vision of self that is distanced from traditional versifications of the 'I'. Henry is identified with the dead in such a way as to make his character emblematically the subject and object of elegy at all times. In 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd', Whitman adapts his customary use of repetition to the moods of elegy, his use of a universally announcing 'I' becoming the reflective voice of the mourner. The difference between this approach to elegy and Berryman's is that Whitman's use of the 'I' stresses external contact with his fellow man through a complete understanding of himself, whereas Berryman uses images of his fellow man in an attempt to recognize and understand the self. Whitman invokes metaphor and symbolism in this process, such as the

pastoral imagery of 'When Lilacs[...]', to assist the reader in the mourning process of acceptance. But Berryman presents his subjects for mourning unadorned, often unglamorously, as with Delmore Schwartz, in the throes of a tragic demise; this presentation often mirrors the display of Henry the mourner in the throes of his grief. While Whitman ultimately seems to appease death with an apparent comprehension and consequent reconciliation with the depth of existence ('thus would I chant a song for you | O sane and sacred death.'), Berryman is concerned to show the mourner's failure to understand, and the melancholic's fascination with the prospect of his demise played out in the deaths of others.

The overt ambivalence portrayed by Berryman can be seen operating in a comparable but distinct way in the elegies of Auden. Auden's ambivalence is ultimately social and textual, without the intensely Freudian difficulties of Berryman's mourning voice. Auden often seems to be moving more towards obituary than elegy, assessing in summarizations of wit and candour the life lost without necessarily slipping into expressions of grief to match a mourner's actual grief. As I have said in Chapter One, Auden's elegies observe the process of mourning, and indeed the process of elegy objectively, while Berryman seeks to expose and explain mourning by constructing an internal dramatization of the process in his poetry.

Auden's elegy to Freud does not enact any process of mourning, and identifies with its subject only through imitation. Even this is not textual but tenuously structural; Auden places his poetic voice outside the subjection of Freud's theories, and this distancing is comparable to the way Freud's discoveries may have been subject to his own neuroses, despite their clinical presentation in his work. As Ramazani notes, he psychoanalyses the psychoanalyst, but as an elegist, Auden exempts himself from the elegiac process which turns the mourned subject into a literary effect, an illusory persona.[5] Auden stops short of pure identification in this respect since he retains an authorial voice, not subject to the experience of mourning, whereas Berryman places his mourning voice within the text, alongside the figure that

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[5] Ramazani, p. 177.

voice mourns.

Henry's multiplicitous perspective constitutes an enactment of Freud's exploration of mourning. His existence as a character in perpetual dialogue and confrontation with himself, especially in the 'Bones' passages, can be seen as a literary paradigm of the internal conflicts of the mourning mind that Freud describes.

In Chapter Two I looked at the elegiac and other elements in the work of Berryman's main contemporaries, Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, Randall Jarrell and Delmore Schwartz, and showed how their respective poetics influenced their approach to the element of elegy in their work, and how this differed both from the elegies I examined in Chapter One and from the elegiac in Berryman's work.

Roethke's sense of the elegiac emerges through his use of intensely shaded memory. The intimacy of memory reflects the intensity of the relationship, presented in the past tense. Roethke heightens emotion in his use of memory by emphatically centring them around himself, as in 'My Papa's Waltz' and 'Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt and Frau Schwartze'. 'Elegy for Jane' involves neither pastoral hyperbole nor critical distance, but instead conveys deeply felt loss with a public restraint; in this way he might be seen as creating a movement in elegy distinct from pastoral antecedents or modernist coolness.

Jarrell involves the twentieth century in his use of elegy by using his World War Two experience as a context for the vision of death in his poetry. He re-evaluates mourning by taking the communal voice of the mourned before the mourner, as in 'The Death of the Ball-Turret Gunner' or 'Losses'. He defamiliarizes the reader of elegy through this process of standing outside the authorial mourning voice, foreshadowing, albeit in a more straightforward way, the extreme shifts of personal stance in Berryman's elegies.

Lowell constructs his elegiac patterns from two separate approaches. In *Life Studies*, he first sets up a series of memorials to a number of literary figures, summing up aspects of their life, personality and ideas with more obvious empathy than Auden. Lowell self-consciously acknowledges in 'Ford Madox Ford' for example that he is

'selling short' the memory of the character he is remembering. In the example of 'Hart Crane' he takes on the voice of Crane with an aggressive exaggeration of his persona, wilfully eschewing the tendency of elegy to beautify the life of the subject.

In the family histories of *Life Studies*, Lowell uses the viewpoint of a knowing child to stress the centrality of memory to elegiac writing, the need to be grounded in images of the lost figure which can only resemble their former concreteness; moreover the use of memory by Lowell arouses the paradox that despite the vividness of his recollections, his memories are overlaid by the cynicism of his maturity, suggesting the plasticity of memory, which in public elegies of praise and panegyric was perhaps more amenable to the amelioration of the subject's image, rather than bringing about a harsh realization and self-discovery. Lowell's ambivalent attitude towards his subjects, however, seems to derive not from the psychological distress caused by grief but by a more straightforward ambivalence, albeit of a psychological nature; while Berryman swings violently between expressions of love and hate for those mourned in his work, notably the father on whose grave Henry spits (385) but about whom he insists 'Also I love him'(145, l. 1), Lowell's memorials to his father are suffused with pity and a witty savagery.

In Delmore Schwartz Berryman found the contemporary with whom he could most intensely identify, and in Chapter Two I noted Schwartz's identification with the character of Hamlet, something which Berryman may have equally found himself in the midst of. It is this kind of identification which gives rise to the sense of the elegiac in the work of both poets. Schwartz employs dialogue, as in 'Father and Son' to elucidate his complex attitudes towards death, a Freudian method of resolution which parallels Berryman's dialogues of Henry as a method of mixing Socratic reasoning with chaotic ambivalence. Furthermore, the use of this dialogue as emblematic of the tension between life and death is represented further in Schwartz's work with the recurrent image of himself in the mirror, something which shames and frightens him, and to which he refers as his 'Ghost'[6]. This corresponds to Berryman's image of the

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[6] Delmore Schwartz, 'The Sin of Hamlet', *Selected Poems: Summer Knowledge* (New York: New Directions, 1967), p. 35.

dead Schwartz as 'the new ghost', and his own use of mirror imagery as a metaphor for mental atrophy and uncertainty of self ('I stalk my mirror down this corridor'(195, l. 1)). While Berryman makes frequent use of dialogue with illusory selves, Schwartz generally sets about his poetics through a solitary paranoid voice, its dialogues arising from his questioning of self-image. The creation of a tragically uneasy persona in Schwartz's poetry gives Berryman's elegiac empathy the necessary intensity. As Schwartz sees himself in the mirror, Berryman sees himself in Schwartz, and in his elegies to him he puts Henry in Schwartz's position in such a way as to go beyond the normal associations of elegy.

In Chapter Three I looked at Berryman's work prior to *The Dream Songs* in order to pin down the derivation of the elegiac in his work. I noted that his first attempt at publication was with 'Elegy: Hart Crane'. This poem, while immature, can be seen as an embryonic example of his development towards a truly elegiac poetics. Its immaturity lies perhaps in its lack of self-reflexiveness, its use of Crane as a set of images to advance the working of the poem, rather than using the poem's imagery and construction to bring us towards Crane and the emotional resonance between subject and object that is presumably intended in an elegy of such musicality as this. The poem is deemed guilty of the shortcomings which were levelled at Berryman throughout his early career, for example by William J. Martz regarding *The Dispossessed*, that the density of his style obscured the poems' failure to deal sincerely with their subject or advance an argument or conceit with genuine substance:

> Vagueness, obscurity, a failure to project a clear dramatic situation, characterize a number of the poems in the volume. 'Winter Landscape' [...] does not realize a meaningful theme about it [Breughel's painting] or, as Berryman intended, about something else.'[7]

I feel that in some senses these criticisms are exaggerated, and that nevertheless, despite any shortcomings, the elements of his poetry of mourning can be observed in the poetry of *The Dispossessed*, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*, and *Berryman's*

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[7] William J Martz, *John Berryman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), p. 17.

Sonnets. Chief among these elements is the experimentation with persona, the taxing of the poetic 'I' to the point that the attachment between self and object becomes crucially contested; and indeed the occlusion of this attachment becomes representative of the questioning of the roles of empathy and perspective in elegy. Poems such as 'Winter Landscape' and 'The Statue' indicate that he was clearly concerned with contrasting points of view, the relationship between art and the outside world, and between this and immortality, all of which in turn are central to his immanent poetics of elegy. Before making a habit of elegizing real people, Berryman is, in these poems, constructing ambivalent memorials to other works of art, which themselves are treated as intended memorials of their once living subjects. In this way he is drawing attention to the essential irony of the elegiac mode; that it cannot revive its subject, and yet endowing it with literary posterity means that it survives in the memory not as a person but as an element of text. Berryman seems to have touched on something which develops later in the eternal present stasis of an artistic memorial, in 'Winter Landscape' and 'The Statue'; the concern in *The Dream Songs* with consequence and fate, the crises of the past unearthing fears in the present, can be seen here in a more rarefied, academic form. In *The Dream Songs*, such issues devolve from Henry's peculiar voice, Berryman's insertion of bizarre but striking imagery at all turns without preamble, and a persona of guilt and fatalism ('Mr Past being no friends of mine', 'an image of the dead on the fingernail | of a newborn child'). The more specifically personal issues of consequence that partly define *The Dream Songs* can be seen also in something like 'The Ball Poem', which shows matters of childhood impressing themselves on the adult world, albeit in a very different idiom from the later work; the notion of childhood as a bitter lesson is summed up in the poem's pivotal moment: 'He is learning, well behind his desperate eyes | The epistemology of loss.' By contrast, we can see in the idiom, more than the content, of 'Canto Amor' and 'The Nervous Songs' what was to come in *The Dream Songs*. In these pieces he seems to come closest to his later definitive voice. In addition he is clearly developing a sense of persona beyond Yeatsian imitativeness,

towards the kind of voice that operates in 'Of 1826' (Song 22). The voices inhabiting 'The Nervous Songs' are still, however, incomplete in this context, since there is still an overriding poet's voice inhabiting clearly disparate personae, as in 'The Song of the Tortured Girl' or 'The Song of the Demented Priest', whereas the voice of *The Dream Songs*, even though in pieces most of the time, exhibits a specific ultimate derivation, which is also the poem's motivation; its shattering is internal, stemming from personal crisis, rather than using public ventriloquism to articulate views of personality and the human lot, which is in essence the principle of 'The Nervous Songs'.

In this sense the collection of sonnets, written in 1947 but not published until 1966, are closer to the shifting patterns of voice and viewpoint in *The Dream Songs* than the later poems of *The Dispossessed* in that the sonnets have just one true speaker, whose modern (but time-honoured) problems are couched in a relatively unchanging diction, a remarkably formal Petrarchan style. *Berryman's Sonnets* does not exhibit the frequent, wild inversions of grammar and distinctive use of slang, but in the effort to crystallize a persona based upon personal loss they are exemplary. The passion that broods through the sonnets is expressive of anguish at a forsaken love and happiness. This too is the prime motivation for Henry's 'plights & gripes'; he is driven by loss and his deterioration as a result of this compulsion is demonstrated in the text by his loss of himself.

In *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* Berryman suggests more strongly the direction in which his stylistic motifs would develop, while still taking experimentation with persona as a starting point for, rather than an illustration of, his poetics. *Bradstreet*'s conceit of eliding persona as a means of illustrating reciprocally the worlds of the two poets still derives from a textual perspective, the structural concept of a poet entering his own work. *The Dream Songs* takes this idea to a logical thematic conclusion, thereby making the elegy a matter of great force within and without the text. By placing an image such as Henry, a facsimile of a poet, within the text, and worrying his sense of self from the outset, Berryman simultaneously mocks

and reinforces the integrity of a poetic persona, and when that persona mourns, the inefficacy of Henry shows that personae and elegy are fused, through Berryman's understanding of the profound passion and essential illusoriness of the mourning character.

This is the basis of my contention in Chapter Four that Henry works as a focus for the textual incompleteness that distinguishes the Songs, but that he expresses an awareness of his own absurd position as a non-existent mourner, and exemplifies the deepest empathy and identification in his mourning adjacent in the text to the now non-existent mourned. Henry's initial, 'irreversible loss', that of his father, is what has brought him about, and consequently he is fated to question and dispute the nature of this loss to some kind of resolution. He is a 'Huffy Henry'(1) because such questioning is all he is ultimately capable of; he sulks, 'unappeasable'(1), because he has no real life of his own, and can only lament the loss of others, who become, ironically, no more real than he is. Furthermore, Henry is in mourning, ultimately, for himself, and turns the commonplace elegiac motif of selfish grief into a construct of textual commentary on the delineation of mourning poetry and of the actual manifestation of grief from a psychoanalytical perspective. The troubled consciousness of Henry is a form of shorthand for the ironies that the transformation of grief into text brings about, and is also a mirror of the poet's concerns with the way the modern mind attempts to deal with loss. Taking his lead from Freud, he sees the real and perceived losses in infancy as the systemic basis of subsequent losses of faith, emotional stability and a coherent consciousness. Chapter Four uses the example of the most noted elegies in the Songs to illustrate this view of the role of Henry. As in Song 267 for Louis MacNeice, the conflation of text and idea in elegiac form is subtly demonstrated: 'So Henry's thought rushed onto a thousand screens | & Louis', the midwife of it.' Such an utterance unifies the questions that his elegiac mode generates. The image of 'a thousand screens' brings out the idea of the text as somehow comparable to cinema, concrete in a sense, but also two-dimensional and chimerical. This conflict of notions is also represented in the image of MacNeice

being 'the midwife' of 'Henry's thought', giving a physical, generative basis to a cerebral action, making artistic creation comparable with actual birth. The consequences of birth are of course central to the thematic structure of *The Dream Songs*, even birth itself as a consequence, and in reference to this Berryman seems to summarize the duality of his art as an elegist in the title of his work: the text-bound grief, the surreal juxtaposition of illusory mourner alongside, or in place of, the mourned, might be distilled as 'dream'; and the concrete sincerity of mourning, the expression of sorrow in verse to communicate a feeling of loss that acknowledges its own ephemeracy but seeks to move the reader in spite of this might be represented as 'song'.

This unifying theme was developed in Chapter Five in looking at *The Dream Songs* in its entirety as a form of elegy, in its extrapolation of an elegiac pretext beyond specific memorial, stemming from the already posited argument that in the Songs elegy is a first principle, it is what defines Henry's character, if he has one, above all other attributes. Outside of the dedicated remembrances, Henry mourns for himself, for society, he becomes mourning in his elementary existence. In Chapter Five I have shown in a number of examples that Henry's preoccupation with death is not just occasioned by particular experiences of it but is the common denominator of his character set, and is the precondition of the ideas he sets forward and the situations in which we find him, such as the desperate attempt to re-enter his grave, the constant references to the trauma of his childhood loss, the recurrent death of Henry, which I associated with certain ideas drawn from *Totem and Taboo* in Chapter Four, and the ongoing reference to his father, sometimes in subtly biographical hints ('Oklahoma, sore | from my great loss leaves me.'(195)) and elsewhere in more obvious and more general analyses of the nature of such tragedy and its consequences ('and God has many other surprises, like | when the man you fear most in the world marries your mother'(168)). Henry's frantic musings on this subject, which culminate in Song 384, may be seen as a form of catharsis; not for Berryman but for Henry who, as an embodiment of grief seeks to cure himself not of the pain of existence he endures and

demonstrates, but of existence itself. Henry does not achieve this extraordinary resolution to any satisfactory degree, and is alive at Song 385 despite having died and having his death foreshadowed many times (the image of Henry as a pussycat may be instructive here). His recurrent death or closeness to it may also be a means of commentary upon his self-destructiveness, his wanton attitude to daily life as in Song 96, for instance:

> Why drink so, two days running?
> two months, O seasons, years, two decades running?
> I answer (smiles) my question on the cuff:
> Man, I been thirsty.

This attitude itself may derive from a barely concealed desire to assuage guilt through the ultimate abdication of responsibility for life. In addition, Berryman's elegiac empathy is more intensely figured than say Whitman's consolatory vision of 'lovely and soothing death': for Henry, death is a state sincerely wished for, and he envies his friends its achievement. In this sense the ambivalence is greater still than that to which Freud refers. While elegy typically dwells upon a conflict between the fear of death as brought into the foreground by the loss which is being mourned and a simultaneous duty to comfort against that loss and rationalize its meaning by portraying the afterlife as a refuge from the rigours of earthly existence, Berryman picks away at the latter's euphemistic undertone and presents ambivalence in the image of that state. He portrays Henry living in the midst of death, surrounded by hellish spectres, expressing a maniacal desire to join those who haunt him, yet at the same time wishing to fulfil his vocation as a poet, especially one of mourning, rather than suffering the premature end of those who spectrally remind him of this vocation. So not only does Berryman simultaneously fear death and wish for its release, he also fears life, yet wants to live longer. This pattern of traumatic indecision is played out without the need to move towards traditional consolation, which in this respect is exposed for its essential purpose, to appease the guilt of the bereaved who live on.

In Chapter Six I identified the aspect of *The Dream Songs* which definitively sets out the elegiac in Berryman's poetics as unique: the use of the American minstrel

tradition. I explored the motives involved in this use of the 'Bones' dialogues and the heightened elements of blackface slang, which I have argued are more diverse in their biographical sourcing than Haffenden and others apparently suggest. The use of minstrelsy is not just the addition of a peculiarly American flavour or an encrustation of an archaic tone in some post-modern manner, but is connected back through the various manifestations in the work of the central theme of mourning, linking them together to identify the work as fundamentally elegiac. In using the image of a blacked-up white male Berryman gives popular significance to the notion of identity, the uncertainty of self which the intense identification of mourning brings about. Chapter Six demonstrates Berryman's awareness of and sympathy with African-American culture in Songs such as 60, which uses the irony of minstrel dialogue to set out the contradictions of a contemporary issue of race, or Song 40, which takes on the voice of the runaway slave, Huck Finn's Jim out on his own, 'scared a lonely'. Readings of Wittke and Robert Toll's work on minstrelsy show Berryman's indebtedness to the minstrel show for the structure of his work, not just in terms of the use of dialogues between Tambo and Bones but in the descriptions of patterns of performance, as Toll notes, combining comic and serious songs, songs done in dialect and others that, 'commented on current events and social problems'[8] . Other resemblances include the diversity of subject matter in the dialogues of Tambo and Bones, the verbal horseplay; the use of mispronunciations, pompous malapropisms and puns comparable with Berryman's stylized verbosity and idiosyncrasies. The serious songs of minstrel shows that Toll describes were sentimental ditties directed 'toward dying or dead lovers'.[9] The irony of connecting morbid sentimentality in minstrel songs to Berryman's use of Songs to dead friends seems central to a poetics of elegy. The possibility that the title of Berryman's poem may derive in part from the source of such a minstrel song concerning the death of friends confirms the significance of the motif if we are to consider *The Dream Songs* as a whole as a primarily elegiac work. Furthermore, the indirect origin of this part of minstrel lore,

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[8] Toll, p. 52.
[9] ibid., p. 54.

the beliefs of African slaves, may be approached for their relevance to the use of such religious patterns in *The Dream Songs*, chiefly the beliefs raised in Chapter Six that dreams were regarded by many African tribes as visitations from spirits of the dead.

In Chapter Seven I argued that the poetics of elegy do not necessarily terminate in the structures and stylings of *The Dream Songs*, but that Berryman's later collection *Love & Fame* exhibits, albeit in a very different form and to different ends, a concern with the persona of mourning and the problem of a coherent self. As Kathe Davis has noted, the greater formal orthodoxy of *Love & Fame* compared with *The Dream Songs* does not necessarily constitute a less conventional attitude to persona, and that the voice which articulates the opinions and recalls the experiences of *Love & Fame* may be as much of a distancing tool as that of Henry or the voices in 'The Nervous Songs' or *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*.[10] The voice which recounts a youthful self in the early sections of *Love & Fame* is in a sense mourned by the reflective, judgmental voice of the later section, a resolution of the divided soul that defines Henry, achieved here through religious epiphany, the moment of conversion, redemption and the end of ambivalence, as in the sixth of the 'Eleven Addresses to the Lord': 'Finally you opened my eyes. | My double nature fused in that point of time | three weeks ago before yesterday. | Now, brooding thro' a history of the early Church, | I identify with everybody, even the heresiarchs.' While the speaker's 'double nature' is 'fused', he still thinks in terms of psychological attachments, in his *identification*, 'even with the heresiarchs.' He suggests a resolution to his problematic identification with the dead, his obsession with 'my poor father frantic'(l.9), in its replacement with a more catholic and hopefully less complicated identification with 'everyone', even those among whom he perhaps would once have counted himself, 'heresiarchs'.

It is Ramazani's initial consideration (with subsequent qualifications) that modern elegies in general eschew normal consolatory modes as an enactment of the process of melancholic mourning.[11] I would argue that the poets he cites in this respect are working not in the psychological sphere he suggests but are simply

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[10] Davis, p. 51 (see note 148, p. 188)
[11] Ramazani, p. 4.

reacting against the genre itself.[12] Berryman, however, is attempting to dramatize the process of mourning in the language of the neurotic. While modern elegy, aside from Berryman, has certainly moved away from or commented upon its tradition, Berryman stands alone in his treatment of mourning in poetry as an elementary compulsion from which all other aesthetic considerations derive. In a sense it is already taken for granted by Berryman that the consolation of elegy is discredited, and in any case his emotional energy is taken up not in critique but in depicting mourning as a state as much as a process. Berryman's rejoinder to the traditional questions of the mourner is to change the context, and not expect simple answers but ask more complex questions of himself, of his absent friends, and of God. This disturbance of context can be seen in the various motifs and elements of his poetics I have so far set out.

The minstrel persona acts as part of such defamiliarization, taking the reader out of the scene of pastoral or even typical twentieth century elegy, outside a European tradition but connected implicitly to ancient superstition. But the Songs are aligned with twentieth-century systems of belief through the expressed involvement with Freud, the self-evident importance of dreams. This also brings the work into a modernist line in its interest in diverse alien cultures and religions, as in Song 73, 'Karesansui, Ryoan-ji', Song 102 ('The sunburnt terraces which swans make home | with water purling, Macchu Picchu died | like Delphi long ago') or the 'Walking, Flying' sequence, Songs 251 to 253. In all this there is an implied ironic nostalgia for a lost time and place. But paradoxically Berryman escapes the immediate influence of the modernists through the discovery of his own voice, less academic than high modernism, less social than Auden, more colloquial than Yeats. Indeed as his early work shows, it was by throwing off these influences that he found a means of expression that was itself alien to the culture in which the poet himself lived, placing the elegy in a context far removed from pastoral scene but at an ironic distance from

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12 'In his "elegies ... in no sense consolatory," Owen, for example, mocks traditional compensations for the dead, dismissing as "fatuous sunbeams" the principle elegiac emblem of immortality.' Ramazani, p.4.

the American society in which the poetry was written.

So pastoral scene is replaced with a jarring psychological landscape; reverent remembrance is replaced with anger and confusion, manic spins of emotion. It is not new of course that the grieving poet is seen to think of himself; Berryman sees the relevance of this and generally ditches reconciliation to put the survivor's grief unequivocally at the forefront of the work. The poet's fate, his mortality, his 'destined urn', becomes the focus of the poem, as the loss he mourns being the reminder of his doom. And while he readily accepts the reality of his fate, he does not accept the role of God in this reality. Henry's position as a mourner is not atheistic but antagonistic: 'God's Henry's enemy.' As he is with God, Henry often expresses aggression towards his subject, or at least a fierce candour. While Berryman hints at the possibility of a pastorally influenced beatification for his mourned poets, especially Schwartz, he doesn't disguise the ugliness and tragically mortal nature of earthly life.

Henry's struggle with the dead is a problem of obsessive empathy. He takes each death personally, and Henry's aggression in dealing with loss arises from the sense of recurrence, each death progressively colouring his view of his original loss, furthering the need for reconstruction. This of course is simultaneously the origin of Henry's apparent religious torment, his difficulty in dealing with the 'exalted father' God of *Totem and Taboo*. Each subsequent loss is treated as one not only of a figure of friendship, creativity, or other personal significance, but of fatherhood, and the normality that that was perceived to have brought with it. His guilt that pervades the Songs derives from the basic Oedipal fear that he wished his father's death. This is distinct from the treatment of Freudian matter in, say, Auden's elegies. Berryman puts the Freudian material into the essence of the work — the babble of the manic depressive, the 'talking-out' of a problem, the release of unconscious fears. This may be connected once again to the use of the minstrel voice and its spiritual derivation, in the sense that dream songs are warnings of imminent death. The purpose of the poem in this respect is to prepare for Henry's demise. In the psychological sphere Henry is a psychosis trying to resolve himself out of existence; in the fantastical, mythical sense

he is a ghost trying to lay himself to rest.

Finally, by placing himself alongside the dead through the use of pronouns and the adjacency of Henry, Berryman is emphasizing the literariness of persona and the source of mourning. As Berryman says in 'One Answer to a Question: Changes', his essay of criticism of his own work, 'a pronoun may seem a small matter, but she matters, he matters, it matters, they matter. Without this invention [...] I could not have written either of the two long poems that constitute the bulk of my work so far.'[13] Elegy as recreated by Berryman in this respect subsumes the mourned into literature, makes literature out of them, and literary capital. This is a traditionally implicit event that Berryman acknowledges and brings to the fore. The burial of F. J. Callahan is 'part of Henry's history'(129, l. 12). But Henry does not have a history, he is not part of any real history, only in the sense that a novel may be called a history. Berryman's use of his personal life to such an extent in his work intensifies the elegiac since the poet is, by making literature out of himself, suggesting identification not just as a survivor or mourning friend but as purely illusory textual companion. He brings out the 'destined urn' theme of the elegist being associated with the greatness of those he mourns, not simply through guises of disparaged vanity or on a purely human level but in the interplay of characters in their utterly textual nature.

Berryman brings most emphatically to elegy the issue of the self in a poem. The self we see in *The Dream Songs* and his other works is not Berryman but a literary construct based upon him. This projection of a version of real self provides a kind of irony but is also productive of profoundly sincere emotional expression. The irony and sincerity correspond with the two overriding factors at work in elegiac poetry: the cathartic and the self-consciously literary. In the cathartic sense Henry mourns simply because he does not want those he has lost to be gone, he wishes they were still alive. This desire comes before memorializing the life that has passed, and is manifested in the hauntings of Henry whose metaphoric nature is always ambiguous. The conquest of this haunting is achieved through an unfettered

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[13] John Berryman, 'One Answer to a Question: Changes', *The Freedom of the Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1976), p. 327.

expression of grief that intends, but unsatisfactorily achieves recuperative reconciliation, not with external forces bringing about the loss, but with the parties in an internal struggle of traumatized persona.

In the literary sense, Berryman effects a textual attachment of mourning by placing the central voice of *The Dream Songs*, a figure who is never fully realized, in his own narrative world that uses the poet's life as narrative material. This voice is outside Berryman, and talks to, about and with himself in the first, second and third persons. With this fluctuating distance, the mourned figures appear on the page at the same level of artifice as Henry; mourning becomes both a literary event and an irony of posterity, and of its own concreteness. The mourned figure is memorialized as a literary artefact because that is all he now can be. He cannot exist but on the page, and the elegist's grief is bringing this process of artifice back around to catharsis. The poet lives on in his work, but the elegist fears his own death, and so must leave behind literary artefacts of his own: the elegies to other poets. *The Dream Songs*, as a self-consciously argued elegiac text that is nevertheless sincerely expressive of loss definitively summarizes this duality, and as such is a memorial to the self in the deepest sense and a product of the need for a representation of elegy not simply as the result of specific loss but as the basis for a whole system of poetic expression.

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